

run while you still can by cheekasprak

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: 1990s, Abusive Relationships, Alternate Universe - College/University, Alternate Universe - Different First Meeting, Alternate Universe - No Pennywise (IT), F/M, M/M, Minor Character Death, New Year's Eve, Panic Attacks, Period-Typical Homophobia, Skiing, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, Verbal Abuse, a smidge of jealous! Richie, eddie runs track, i can't stick with a theme, there may be smut later if i'm feeling brave

Language: English

Characters: Audra Phillips, Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Georgie Denbrough, Maggie Tozier, Mike Hanlon, Original Male Character(s), Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak, Stanley Uris, Wentworth Tozier

Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Audra Phillips, Eddie Kaspbrak/Original Male Character(s), Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Mike Hanlon/Stanley Uris

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-10-13

Updated: 2019-11-27

Packaged: 2019-12-19 03:01:45

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 3

Words: 33,889

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

“Stay?” He requests tenderly.

And Eddie isn't sure exactly what he means, how long he wants Eddie to lay there with him. But he knows this: he would stay with Richie as long as he asked, he would do anything for him if he smiled the way he is now. He would lay there for years, with Richie's hand on his arm, and Richie's breath flowing across the side of his face, and Richie's smell overwhelming all of his other senses. He would leave, too, if that's what Richie wanted. He would do anything.

Because he loves him, more than he thinks he's ever loved anything before.

OR

Richie and Eddie meet in college, and Eddie can pinpoint that day as the moment his life really began.

Basically, the AU in which nothing changes except the Losers meet differently.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

UPDATE: I have decided to finish this, though I was unsure at first I was very excited by the response I received. It might take a hot minute, but I'll have a new chapter eventually.

Original Note:

So... I may never finish this, just so y'all know. I'm a mess and this took so long to write and then I lost interest so we'll see what happens. Let me know what you think, though! Also, this was only kind of proofread and I was jumping all around the story adding new bits and pieces so I really hope it flows properly but... idk

Life really starts for Eddie during his Freshman year of college. Growing up, he was a scrawny kid, a whole head shorter than every other boy his age with sharp elbows and knees and a pudgy stomach and cheeks. He was dorky. He'd had a few good friends and good grades, but he wasn't allowed any hobbies or hangouts. This was because Eddie's mom was sick. If you asked Eddie in middle school, he'd have told you his mommy was his best friend in the whole world. She loved him, kissed him on the head, tucked him in at night, took care of him when he was sick. And Eddie felt bad, because he had a lot of problems. He was sick *all* of the time and his mom was a single mother dealing with it all alone, but she never complained or made him feel bad. Sure, she got frustrated when he forgot to take his medicine or did something dangerous, but it was always because she loved him.

And then the switch flipped.

The summer between middle school and high school is a weird phenomenon. Kids grow three feet, voices drop, sex becomes a hot topic, and rebellion rears its ugly head.

Eddie grew about two inches, his voice dropped only minimally, and

he shied away from even *thinking* about sex. But, *boy* did rebellion light a fire inside of him. He started to have questions about how sick he *really* was, and it started a disturbing war between him and his mother. Her sweet boy was starting to develop his own thoughts, his own questions and interests, and it was making her sick. So she pushed back, locked him in his room and trapped him underneath a glass cup like a bug so he could watch everyone else have fun from inside his little glass world.

And he was so tired of feeling like glass. Fragile. Weak.

When he hit eighteen, he busted out of the house like a balloon bursting. He managed to find his way to NYU, because going too far from home was scary. He was going to be a *nurse* because it was what he'd dreamed of his whole life, and he was going to be an *adult*. It was all making his head spin.

So what do you do when your life is spinning like a Gravitron at a fair? You get drunk and you get a few tattoos. Or a *lot*. And when he sends pictures of him and his friends home to his Ma, he *might* send the pictures that visibly show his tattoos on purpose.

The first half of Freshman year is insane, but it hits a climax and settles down. He starts to become interested in his schoolwork again. His grades were good before, but they rocket up with the new attention, and he finds that he really, *really* loves his degree choice. He spends all weekend, every weekend at the cafe on campus, studying. He *loves* it.

A dumb, insignificant encounter that he probably wouldn't have remembered if it was any other person is what gets the ball of his life rolling. He is in line, waiting to order the same latte he purchased every time he is there- except for when it was Pumpkin Spice Season, of course. The idiot in front of him is flailing his arms about wildly, taking his sweet time talking the barista's ear off about... something. Eddie isn't really listening, merely huffing in annoyance behind him and checking his watch repeatedly. It's been a long morning already, with his mom talking his ear off about the dangers of tattoo needles and ink, alcohol and having *fun*, and ordering a latte truly should *not* take longer than a minute. But, he keeps on talking, and suddenly he moves his upper half just as Eddie is about to lean in and impatiently

tap his shoulder- and one of his wild gestures punches Eddie square in the face.

The best part is that, without thinking, his own arm flails up on instinct and backhands the strangers face in return.

And that's how he meets Richie Tozier.

Except, he doesn't really *meet* him. He yells several insults at Richie over his profuse apologies, allows him to buy his coffee, and then leaves. He tries not to blush at how much he just embarrassed himself in front of a *very* attractive stranger.

No, he doesn't *meet* Richie Tozier until much later, and it all starts with Stan.

Two years after that, it's Eddie's Junior year, and he comes to a startling realization in September that he's lost every single friend he made his Freshman year. All of them. When his rebellion died down and he turned back to studying, they all faded away so slowly he didn't even notice. He's not a social person, really. He likes to have a few close people that he can spend all of his time with. And, maybe that's a result of really only having *one* person his whole childhood, but it's just who he is now. He just never thought he'd wind up with *nobody*.

He decides that he's going to make a conscious effort to make friends, and it's embarrassing, really. Because *trying* to make friends is much more difficult than letting them come naturally, every interaction feels like a job interview. He tries talking to the girl who's been his partner in one of his classes, he tries *really* talking to her, but she tells him that she doesn't date short guys. He almost takes the time to explain to her that he just wanted to hang out, not date, but he decides that he doesn't want to hang out with someone like her, anyway. So, he keeps trying, but no one ever takes him up on the offer. He really only tries to get to know a handful of people, though, so it's not like he's getting turned down left and right. It doesn't help

that he doesn't spend much time outside of his dorm room and the campus cafe.

That's when it occurs to him.

The next Saturday that he spends at the cafe, he waits awkwardly for his drink by the pickup counter. The barista that works there is a tall, sweet boy named Stan. He has a mop of curly brunette hair and always wears lovely button-up shirts that give Eddie the impression that he's someone he'd like to hang out with. That's really all he has to go off of, though, because the two of them have hardly spoken over the past three years Eddie's been going there. Eddie isn't a small talk person, not one bit, but he gets the impression that this guy isn't either.

So, when Stan calls out his order and sets it on the counter, Eddie steps up abruptly and tries to make conversation. It goes something like this:

"I'm Eddie."

"I know. It's written on the cup. Vanilla Latte?"

"Yes."

"Okay, have a good day."

"Wait, do you like video games?"

"I guess... I don't really play them."

"I have a SuperNintendo. Would you want to come over and play with me?"

"Okay. My shift is over at 4."

Stan comes over when his shift is done, and for once Eddie doesn't make his eyes go bloodshot by studying, but instead by staring at a screen. He likes Stan, a lot. He's surprised to find that, after playing video games for only an hour, he likes him a lot better than any of the other friends he'd had before. Unlike them, Stan actually likes to *talk* about stuff. They talk about Star Wars and classes and their

childhood and it feels *good*.

And Eddie thinks he's made his first *real* college friend.

"So nursing, huh?" Stan says, hand dipped into a bowl of popcorn they'd made together in the shared dorm kitchen.

"Mhm," He replies. He doesn't admit that he sees it as a challenge, a way to prove that he can overcome his fear of all things sickly. Because Stan would eye him curiously, the way all the kids did growing up, and he doesn't want that, "I just, uh, like taking care of people. Comes naturally, y'know?"

"Growing up, my friends always called me 'Dad' because I was the responsible friend. So, yeah, I guess I do know," He flicks a piece of popcorn off of the couch, smiling when it lands on Eddie's sock.

"So, are you from New York?" He likes the quiet hum of the game menu music flowing through the room. The sun has started to go down, painting the room with a blue-orange color. The weather in New York this time of year is truly beautiful, as the trees start to turn colors and soon apple flavored drinks and cakes will be sold everywhere. Silence and conversation both feel comfortable around Stan. It fills Eddie with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

"No, actually. I'm from Maine," Stan answers.

"No way, me too! What part?"

"Derry. Have you heard of it?"

"Mmmm," Eddie's face twists into a thoughtful expression, "Don't think so. I'm from South Portland."

"City man," Stan says plainly. Everything Stan says is plain, he has a dry way of speaking. It can actually be quite funny. Eddie likes it.

Eddie snorts, "Yeah, sure," They pause for a moment, "So, do you have any friends here?"

He shrugs, picks up the controller to start a new game, "I have a few. You met one of them- Richie."

Eddie scrunches up his nose, "I did? Are you sure?" He's certain he'd remember someone by that name.

"Yeah, you met him a couple of years ago, in the cafe."

Eddie picks up the controller, too, wracking his brain for a face to match the name, "Are you sure you don't have me mixed up with someone else?"

Stan sighs and looks at him regretfully, "You kind of... punched him in the face?"

Oh. *Oh*. He didn't even know that he was Stan's friend, let alone his name, "Oh my god. *That* guy was your friend?" He pauses, "Hey, I didn't even punch him in the face! *He* hit *me* in the face and I fought back on instinct!"

Stan shrugs again like it really doesn't matter, "Eh, same difference. The story has kind of evolved over the past few years. Richie is pretty overdramatic."

"How often do you talk about it?" Eddie's embarrassed that Stan's friend group has been talking about him for *years*.

"Not that often but, it *was* pretty funny. Also, Richie asks about 'the *angel* that punched him' all the time," He seems to realize a bit too late how Eddie's eyes widen at *that*, and he scrambles to make it sound less odd, "Richie's weird. He says weird shit all the time."

Eddie's face heats up embarrassingly fast, and he hopes that it blends in with the color of the setting sun, "Oh," he replies, and notices that Stan's beating him at the game and he concentrates on catching up.

After a while, Stan speaks again, "You should come hang out with us sometime. My other friends, I mean. They'd like you a lot."

Eddie blinks at the screen and tries to ignore the simultaneous excitement and nerves bubbling up in his stomach. He wants to hang out with people, but what will they want to do? Will they like casual video game nights, or will they want to spend the entire weekend drinking and smoking pot like his old friends? Eddie isn't picky, but he likes a solid mix of both. He prefers quiet nights in, but he knows

it's good for him to go out and waste all of his energy on dancing and singing at the top of his lungs.

"I'd like that. Can you send texts on your phone?" Eddie asks, pulling out his fancy new flip-phone. They were big these days, and Eddie was a bit behind everyone else in purchasing one, but he was incredibly proud of himself for working hard to buy it.

"Yeah, totally," Stan takes the phone and adds his number in, and Eddie does the same with Stan's.

Eddie is so over the moon that he has a friend, that, for the first time in months, he really wants to call his mom and talk to her. He keeps in touch with her, of course, but he avoids talking to her whenever possible.

It hurts.

He often finds himself longing for the good ol' days, which are actually just the days before he realized the elaborate, abusive scheme she had been pulling. There were times back then when they'd watch her soaps and he used to get really into them. They'd go on rants about the characters and ridiculous plot lines, and they'd laugh a lot. He misses when he thought she hung the moon in the sky.

He doesn't call her because it feels like a weakness, and instead, he concludes his night by studying.

It only takes Stan a day to text him, and a week to invite him over to his apartment. In his text, he claims that it's just a laid back movie night accompanied by a beer or two and pizza. Eddie still wants to look nice. He picks out his favorite peach polo and khaki shorts, because he's been told before that his fashion sense is a *mess* and this

is the only outfit he can ever remember somebody complimenting. He wears a pair of white sneakers to keep it casual.

When he arrives Stan pulls him in for a tight hug, squeezing at his sides shakily. He has a shaky way about everything, shaky hands and fingers and shifty eyes, but he somehow manages to make Eddie feel calm.

The apartment is quaint, perfectly suited for college kids who aren't very picky about their living conditions. It's messy, with paper plates and magazines strewn everywhere. Eddie thinks this is probably what his dorm room should look like, but Eddie has never been a typical college boy.

He's introduced to Stan's friends, Richie, Bill, and Mike. Bill looks older than all of them, like a *real* college student. The hair that flops down over his forehead hides one of his blue eyes from view, like a little shield between him and whoever he's talking to. He wears a black turtleneck that Eddie doesn't think he could ever pull off himself, and he saunters around the room like he owns it. *Well*, he does *rent* it. Turns out, this is actually Richie and Bill's shared apartment, not Stan's. Stan shares an apartment in the same complex with Mike. Mike is sweet, from what Eddie has gathered. His arms are well-defined, like he works out, and he dresses in a nice button-up that reflects Stan's fashion sense. He hasn't spoken much, opting to putter around the house pulling snacks out of the crevices because it doesn't seem like Richie or Bill know much about having a guest over.

And then there's Richie.

Eddie didn't really recall what he looked like from the cafe incident. He could remember he was tall, and that he had big, apologetic eyes, but he had forgotten just how *pretty* he was. The first time he lays eyes on him, *really* lays eyes on him, he flushes from head to toe. Eddie always feels a little flustered around people who are especially attractive, and Richie is no exception. Richie is attractive, but oddly so. He's got a crooked nose, one that was probably broken once or twice, and crooked teeth. He wears glasses and an ugly tie-dye shirt with blue jeans and mismatched, patterned socks. One of the socks has cartoon pizzas printed on it. But, he has pretty pale skin with a

lot more freckles than Eddie has, which his mom always called angel kisses. His eyes are big and brown, framed by long eyelashes that Eddie can see very clearly with the magnification from his glasses. And he has the nicest crooked smile Eddie thinks he's ever seen.

Eddie's *very* flustered.

"Is he cool?" Richie asks, like he's not really there. He's standing on the couch that lines the right wall of the living room, bouncing back and forth between his feet. Stan seems unbothered, so Eddie imagines this isn't an unusual sight.

"Yeah, I think so," Stan says, smiling over at him in a way that makes Eddie feel *welcome*. He stands in the living room awkwardly for what feels like a very long time, before he remembers that Stan said it was a movie night.

"What movie are we watching?" He asks Stan who sits in the small dining area to the left. An almost empty bookshelf sits just beyond the tiny dining table, decorate poorly with eclectic family pictures in an attempt to make the apartment more homey. Stan simply shrugs his thin shoulders in response.

"Mission: Impossible. Ever seen it?" Bill replies from the armchair he's seated in, holding the tape up in his hands. Mike lays some of the snacks he's collected on the coffee table- an ugly, white thing that looks like it was fished out of a dumpster.

"It's got my sexy man, Tom Cruise, in it," Richie comments while making grabby hands at the bag of Cheetos in Mike's hands. Mike tells him to get his own. Richie collapses dramatically onto the couch, claiming Mike has wounded him.

"I believe he's Nicole Kidman's man, actually," Stan replies.

"Pop a squat, Eduardo," Richie says, patting the soft thread of their dirty couch. Eddie ambles over and reluctantly sits next to him. He radiates warmth and energy, like a space heater on Christmas Day.

"I'd be Nicole Kidman's man," Mike sounds off from the kitchen, bringing beers with him this time. Eddie cringes at the thought of

drinking beer, or any alcohol really. He hates the taste, but it will likely take the edge off of how nervous he is, so he accepts the one that Mike hands him.

“So, *Eddie, My Love* - do you like that song?- where are you from?” Richie asks and Eddie debates over whether or not he *has* to make eye contact with him. When their eyes do meet, he feels his cheeks heat up again. People like this- with an all-consuming, quick-witted personality- make him nervous. The way Richie stares so intensely doesn’t help. His eyes are magnified by his glasses and it feels like Eddie is an animal at the zoo, watched by onlookers through a pair of binoculars.

“Maine. And no, I don’t really like old music,” He sniffs, sipping on his beer and pursing his lips when the nasty flavor washes over his tongue. It’s warm as it glides down his throat and Eddie thinks it must’ve been three months since he last had any alcohol.

Richie gasps, “ *Old* music? You mean, you don’t like *classic* music? That song is a masterpiece and I am ashamed to have you in my home.”

Eddie lets himself giggle at the weird way Richie throws his hands on his chest, like he’s dying, “What about you?” He looks away from Richie and at the rest of the group that has also gathered on the couch, “Where are you all from?”

“I’m from Maine,” Mike answers, then he points over at Stan, “We grew up together. Stan says you’re from Maine, too?”

“Yeah, I needed to get out of there, though. I decided to throw myself into the most complicated city in the world as my first big, adult adventure,” He shrugs, “I like New York, though. I was born here, actually, but we moved to Portland after my dad died.”

Richie hums next to him, making Eddie subconsciously adjust his shirt. He feels embarrassingly dressed up in comparison to everyone else, “Too bad you didn’t get the sexy New York accent,” He winks at Eddie, and Eddie scowls back, “I’m from California.”

“That explains the terrible fashion sense, everybody in California

dresses horribly,” Eddie quips.

“ *Terrible?* Have you ever even *been* to California?” Richie raises an eyebrow.

Eddie is quiet for a moment, “No,” he admits, “But I’m not wrong.”

“Can we watch the movie now?” Stan asks from his new position next to Eddie on the couch. Bill puts the tape in.

It’s nice, being slightly tipsy on a couch with friends while watching what Eddie deems to be an *okay* movie, but that’s only because he can hardly figure out what’s going on over Richie’s constant stream of commentary. He asks Stan how they can stand to watch movies with him, and he just shrugs.

Eddie gets to learn little things about everyone in the group, like how Mike was homeschooled and that Bill has a girlfriend, Audra. He learns that Bill’s little brother spends most school breaks in his apartment, and that Richie is an only child, but that he loves Georgie Denbrough with all his heart. Eddie can tell that it’s not just something he says, but that it’s something he genuinely *means* just by watching the way his eyes light up when they talk about Georgie’s next planned visit. They’re like a little family- Bill, Stan, Mike, Richie, and even Georgie. Eddie feels a little like he’s intruding, but they don’t seem to think that. They seem to like hearing about his comic book collection and tattoos.

And Richie latches onto him instantly. It’s no secret among the group that Richie’s a handsy person, and Eddie is no exception. He puts an arm around Eddie while they watch the movie and he pinches at his cheeks and occasionally gives him a wet willy that he thinks is *hilarious* every single time. But he’s warm and funny and truly interested in everything Eddie has to say and Eddie takes a liking to him just as quickly as Richie does.

He wanders to the bathroom at some point during the movie, and when he emerges he’s surprised to find Richie out in the hall.

“Are you stalking me?” He shuts the door behind him and shuffles forward until he can half-lean against the wall. The hallway light is

off, or burnt-out, so the only light streams out from one of the bedrooms and hits Richie's face at a sideways angle. It slides in a line over his left ear and the bottom right corner of his mouth.

Richie smiles, "This is *my* house, buckaroo," His smile is toothy and sweet, it makes Eddie feel comfortable, "But, yeah. You caught me, I was stalking you."

"Oh?" And Eddie suddenly feels quite flushed, a little sweaty.

"Mhm," Richie's eyes squint into something devilish, "I followed you to ask for an apology for that time you punched me in the face," He winks.

"If I recall, it was you who punched me first," He's unimpressed by the excuse for following him to the bathroom, but he doesn't think he'll get a real answer out of Richie, "I just punched you *instinctually*."

"Aw, come on," He shifts and the light moves so it's illuminating one of his eyes, casting an exaggerated outline of his crooked nose onto his cheek, "I think you just wanted to get your hands on this pretty mug," And then he winks again.

"No way in hell. Your face looks more like a mug *shot*," Eddie responds and Richie falters, his grin slipping away a bit before returning in full force.

"You don't mean that! Come on, Eds!" He shouts, wrapping an arm around Eddie's shoulders and ruffling his hair. They roughhouse like that a bit, pushing each other into the walls of the slim hallway until Stan eventually yells at them to 'stop fucking around!'. They laugh, then make their way back to the couch.

They're a close-knit group, but they take Eddie in like he's one of them. After hanging out with them three or four times, Eddie starts to think that he *is* one of them. Maybe.

He spends time with Stan, mostly. Usually, when Stan finishes a shift at the cafe he walks over to Eddie's dorm with him and plays video games for a few hours before heading home. Eddie also hangs out with Bill one-on-one a few times because they both have the same Psychology class and Bill takes studying just as seriously as Eddie does. Despite his anxiousness, he enjoys all the time he spends with everyone because they all seem to genuinely enjoy spending time around him.

For the first time since he moved out, he feels like he's really settling into adult life.

He feels like he can flip the bird at his mom who always told him he'd be no good on his own, he'd need her to care for him forever. He feels invincible.

There's a poster for the Track team in the cafe and Eddie decides to join it. He was never allowed to play any sports and now feels like the perfect time to start. There's no chance he'll be any good, but he figures it's worth a shot.

As it turns out, he's fantastic.

At least, that's what the coach and other runners tell him. He can't believe that he's actually *good* at a sport. Throughout his childhood, he'd been convinced he had asthma. Now, his lungs have never felt clearer as he dashes around the track.

He quickly becomes the coach's favorite, and he catches the eye of another runner. His name is Matt; he's a tall, blonde, dorky guy who flirts with Eddie awkwardly after practices. Up until now, Eddie has never had anyone flirt with him, let alone been on a date. Between his mom and his stunted sexuality, he just never had the chance to explore the dating world. And then, there had also been the deep-rooted scar his mother had given him.

Nobody will ever love you as much as your mother.

Eddie-bear, you're sick. Your mother needs to take care of you.

These small, sly comments had added up to a dark insecurity. If you'd

ask Eddie what his biggest insecurity is, he'd say his height or high-pitched voice. Maybe his inability to grow facial hair or his uptight personality. It'd be a number of things before it would be the truth, and that is because the truth is so far buried under his skin that even he doesn't know what it is that he's afraid of, what burning insecurity smolders in his belly.

He is afraid of being unlovable. He supposes most people are.

He was a broken, ill boy growing up. Even when he'd realized this wasn't true, he was the broken, high-strung boy that no one wanted to invite over. Even in college, when he'd finally settled into being his own self, all the friends he'd thought he'd had faded away one by one. Everyone he's ever known has abandoned him. He's never had anybody stick loyally by his side through thick and thin aside from his mother.

But now, he is at the height of his life. He has friends who invite him over on a regular basis, he is the star of the track team, and a cute guy is blatantly interested in him.

When Matt asks, he enthusiastically agrees to go out with him.

They hit it off instantly. He takes Eddie out on a dinner date, the fanciest one he can afford, and they chat all night about their families and friends and their differing opinions on the quality of Mission: Impossible. At the end of the night, he is a perfect gentleman when Eddie shies away from a kiss, instead planting one on his cheek and agreeing to take it slow.

Eddie is over the moon! He adores Matt and his dumb jokes and how they spend all of their time together studying and cuddling. He never thought anyone would compliment him the way Matt does, peppering him in flattery about his eyes and his smile and occasionally, his ass, though it always makes him blush furiously and tell him to shut up.

He debates sending his mom a photo of him and Matt to tell her about his new boyfriend, but ultimately decides against it.

Eddie is studying for an exam when he gets a call from Richie.

"Eds! Hello!" His voice shouts through the phone so loudly Eddie pulls it back from his ear an inch or two.

"We've discussed this at least ten times, I *hate* nicknames," Eddie sticks his pencil into his textbook to save his place and closes it.

"Eddie is a nickname," Eddie can hear Richie's sigh come through the speaker, *"But, I did not call you to discuss my amazing nicknames, I called you because I'm craving Chinese."*

"I'm American," Eddie answers, pleased at the sudden giggle that sounds from Richie.

"I don't like to eat alone. Come with me, please? I'll pick you up!"

"Why do you have your own vehicle? Do you *enjoy* driving in New York City?"

"No time for questions! I'll meet you in the drop-off zone!"

Richie has the ugliest truck in the world. It's rusted around the edges, painted a bright orange that may have been red at one point, and it's impossible to open the passenger door from the outside. Oh, and none of the windows work.

"This truck is uglier than you," Eddie says as he climbs in. There's empty water bottles and lots of dust everywhere. It smells like the cigarettes Richie smokes. Eddie hates that he's starting to find that smell comforting because he finds *Richie* comforting. Before, cigarettes meant cancer and dead fathers but now, it means Richie and closeness and warmth.

"Don't listen to him, baby," Richie soothes his truck by patting the steering wheel before pulling out of the parking lot.

“Where are we going?” Eddie picks at the dirt that had gathered under his nails just from being in his nasty truck. If he’s being honest, it’s not *that* bad, but something that sounds like his mother itches at his mind and he forces himself to settle against the seat he’s in.

“ *The Super Dragon*, ” Richie tells him happily. Eddie scrunches up his nose and unfortunately he notices, “What’s wrong with that?”

Eddie sighs, pulling his feet up criss cross on the seat, “They nearly failed their last health inspection.”

“Oh my god,” Richie laughs, watching Eddie get comfortable in his truck through sideways glances. Eddie imagines he looks very out of place, surrounded by McDonald’s wrappers and soda cans, “Why the fuck do you know that?”

Eddie can’t believe he’d even ask a question like that, “Knowing that the places you eat at follow health codes is important!”

They sit in a booth with their food and Richie purposefully crowds in on the same side, getting so close that Eddie has no choice but to squish up against the wall of the booth. Richie is annoying, but he always means well, and Eddie would be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy the constant teasing. He feels safe around Richie, like he does with all of his friends. Richie feels like *home*, which is something he never had before.

“So, nursing?” Richie peeks at Eddie from behind his glasses, loudly smacking his lips around his noodles.

“If you tease me about being girly I’ll sock you in the face.”

“Yikes!” Richie holds his hands up, accidentally tossing a few noodles at Eddie with the fork that’s still in his hand. They land on Eddie’s shoulder. Before Eddie gets a chance to get a napkin and pick them up, Richie uses his mouth to eat them off.

“You’re disgusting!” Eddie pushes his face away, turning red. His

shoulder tingles where he touched it but he hardly notices it above the disgust of Richie's saliva being on him.

Richie just smirks at him evilly, "I don't think nursing is girly. I think you'd make a good nurse, considering you know about shit like *health codes*. "

Eddie eyes him to check if he's joking. There's nothing but a fond smile on his face and it makes Eddie relax into a smile of his own. He then proceeds to geek out about nursing and medicine and psychology for nearly twenty minutes, all while Richie listens and tosses out his own wisecracks or patient '*mhm's*' or nods. Finally, Eddie realizes he's being rude.

"I'm sorry. This is so boring," He gives a shy, self-deprecating chuckle, picking at the food he'd been ignoring the whole time.

"It's boring as hell, but I like listening to you talk about it," Richie says, and Eddie can't believe that he sounds like he's being serious. He can't help the little smile and small bit of pride that rises into his chest, the idea that Richie actually enjoys hearing him talk about his passions is a new and unfamiliar feeling.

"What about you? What's your goal?" Eddie bumps his elbow against Richie's.

"My realistic goal... or my *dream* goal?" Richie leans in, waggling his eyebrows. Eddie takes a moment to appreciate, again, how uniquely and unconventionally attractive he is. His crooked nose would look out of place on just about anyone else, but on Richie, it's an oddly handsome feature. When Eddie starts counting individual freckles, he realizes just how close they are. He pulls back.

"Your dream goal."

"Stand-up comedian," Richie answers easily. Eddie bites back a smile at the thought of Richie on stage, telling his horribly dirty jokes to a crowd.

"I think you'd be good at that," He puts his cheek into his hand, tilting his view of Richie's face to an angle.

“Yeah? So you admit that you think I’m funny?” His long fingers adjust his glasses on his face, and Eddie’s eyes follow them.

“Nah, I just think you’re good at making a fool of yourself, and that’s very funny. I’d pay to see that,” Richie’s thigh presses warmly against his own, and for a second he knocks the bones on their ankles together. Richie’s phone goes off before he can respond.

“Oh,” He says after he takes it out of his pocket and checks the caller ID, “It’s my mom.”

Eddie is surprised when he ignores the call, putting the phone back into his pocket and redirecting his attention to Eddie, “Don’t you want to answer that?”

He sighs in a way that makes Eddie immediately feel bad for asking, “Not really. It’s... complicated. Heavy stuff that you don’t want to hear about.”

He tosses one of the fortune cookies Richie’s way, “Enlighten me.”

“You’re just going to try to psycho-analyze me like Bill. Pass,” Richie grumbles. Eddie unwraps his fortune cookie, even though he knows he won’t eat it. They’re gross and have a taste reminiscent of cardboard, but he loves the little fortunes that come inside. ‘A person of words and not deeds is like a garden full of weeds’ the little piece of paper reads.

“I’d need a PhD in Psychology to even *begin* to understand what’s going on in that brain of yours, trust me. No psycho-analyzing here, I promise.”

Richie rolls his eyes, but submits, “Fine, fine. It’s not that big of a deal, anyway. I’m just not... close to her. Every time she calls it’s just to ask for money or bitch at me about my dad. They got divorced nearly 18 years ago but with the way they act, you’d think it was just yesterday. It’s like Ross and Rachel, except ‘We were on a break’ is actually ‘He said she was just his friend!’” He rolls his eyes again with a smile on his face that looks as fake as a three dollar bill.

Eddie frowns. He’s known Richie for a few weeks, but typically

conversations like this are expertly avoided. He hesitates before replying, "I don't really talk to my mom either."

"No?"

"Now *that's* a long story. She was super controlling when I was younger," He frowns and distracts himself by playing with the wrapper in his hands, "I worry I'll grow up to be just like her, sometimes. But, my point is, I'm in no place to pass judgement on you," He offers a sympathetic smile that Richie returns. Richie cracks open his fortune cookie and shoves it all in his mouth in one go, reading the fortune and talking through his mouthful of cookie.

"Heh, look at this," He shoves the paper into Eddie's hands, and it reads 'You are in good hands this evening', "Does this fortune cookie know something about your magic hands that I don't?" He asks, shooting a wink his direction.

Eddie's tongue feels heavy in his mouth and he shoves at his shoulder. Sexual jokes make him nervous, they always have. He feels like he never really grew into his sexuality properly, like he avoids topics other college kids don't, "You're disgusting. It's obviously talking about your own hands, you single perv," Richie holds up his hands and waggles his fingers.

"They *are* pretty magical!" He says, and Eddie flushes deeper.

"We close in five minutes, lovebirds," A young redheaded girl calls from the counter. Eddie looks back at her and she smiles and waves at him.

"Oh, we aren't-"

"Eduardo, are you saying that you don't see me as boyfriend material?" Richie interrupts him, speaking dramatically loud and throwing a hand over his forehead for good measure, "What about you, lovely lady? If Eddie Spaghetti over here doesn't think I am, maybe I have a shot with you, hot tamale?" Then, he puts a hand up next to his mouth and stage-whispers, "Please pretend to be interested so I can make him jealous," He slides out of the booth and makes his way over to the counter with Eddie close behind.

“Sorry sweetheart, I’ve got a boyfriend,” She answers, “But maybe we can go on a double date sometime?”

“I’m not-” Eddie tries again, but Richie is too much for him to handle. The girl has definitely caught on to his annoyance by now, sharing an eye roll with him

“Absolutely! I might have to force this one-” He claps a hand down onto Eddie’s shoulder, “-to play along, though,” Then, he sticks a hand out towards her, “I’m Richie.”

“Beverly,” She responds, shaking his hands with a smile, “And I assume you’re ‘Eddie Spaghetti?’” Now that they’re up close, Eddie can see how beautiful she is. Her red hair falls just above her shoulders, complimenting her pale complexion on blue eyes perfectly. She wears several bracelets up and down her arms that don’t match the vibe of a fast food Chinese restaurant or the yellow cap she wears that’s part of the uniform. Her charming grin spreads across her face when Richie leans in to pinch Eddie’s cheek.

“It’s *just* Eddie. I’m sorry he’s so annoying,” He rolls his eyes and shoots a glare at Richie for good measure, finding him writing both of their numbers on a napkin for her. Eddie’s pointed look turns into a smile at the revelation that Richie has his number memorized.

“I can lock him up in the store when I leave, if you’d like,” She says with a smirk. Eddie decides in that moment that Beverly is going to be an awesome addition to their friend group.

“*Okay*, that’s our cue to get outta here! Here, text us sometime,” He slides the numbers across the countertop, “You seem fun as shit.”

He then turns towards Eddie, “Let’s get you home so you can study up, smarty pants,” Eddie scratches at his ear where Richie’s warm breath tickles him. He nods, and they find their way back into Richie’s ugly orange death trap.

A few weeks later Matt and Eddie decide to become boyfriends

officially, and that's when Eddie invites him over to hang out with all of his friends. He's only going to stop by for a little while to meet everyone before going to his shift at the *Jonny'O Bar*, but Eddie is still incredibly nervous.

Seeing his friends always calms him down, though.

"When will he be here?" Stan asks, kicking his feet up on the coffee table in Richie and Bill's living room. Their place is the designated hangout, much to Eddie's dismay. They have better movie and video game options, and Richie is very stubborn when it comes to uprooting himself from the apartment. No matter how much Eddie bitches about how dirty it is, nobody ever listens.

"He said he'd get here around 7, so five minutes?" Richie wanders out from his bedroom wearing a garish tropical print button-up, neon pink shorts, and a pair of socks with roses on them. Eddie's just pleased that his socks match for once.

"Who's coming over? Do I get to meet one of Spaghetti's friends?" He slides in next to Eddie, wrapping an arm around him and kicking his feet up on the table as well. It's covered in varying snacks and drinks and old paper plates.

"You get to meet my boyfriend," He mutters, surprised Stan hadn't mentioned it yet, "Could you *please* get your feet away from my pizza?" He can feel Richie's hot breath on the side of his face and he purposefully doesn't turn to look at him so he won't see how close their faces are.

Richie's eyes widen behind his glasses before he catches himself and readjusts, "Wait. You're gay?"

Eddie's heart stills in his chest. *There's nothing wrong with you*, he tells himself, but thoughts of hate crimes and AIDS and his mother tossing disgusted looks at gay couples crowd into his brain.

"Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?" Eddie huffs and snatches his plate of pizza away from Richie's feet and places it in his lap instead. He shoots a challenging glare Richie's direction.

"I wish Richie had a problem with that, maybe he'd finally shut up about how hot he finds Tom Cruise." Stan says, looking unamused with the conversation.

"My celebrity crush is Leonardo DiCaprio nowadays," Richie sighs dreamily, smiling when Eddie grins at him, "If I had a problem with that, I'd be quite the hypocrite."

Oh. Eddie blinks at him slowly. Well, that was certainly something he hadn't known. He feels a bit stupid for thinking all of that talk about hot male celebrities was just his way of joking around.

"I didn't know," He admits. It doesn't change how he views him whatsoever, of course. Why should it? It *does* feel like it changes something, though. Eddie just can't put his finger on it.

Richie shrugs, "I like being hard to figure out," He says, and Eddie agrees. Richie is incredibly hard to figure out.

"Wait," Beverly calls out from the kitchen, rounding the corner in her low-rise sweatpants and fluffy purple sweatshirt. Ben, Bev's boyfriend who has also been hanging out with them more and more lately, is just behind her, arms wrapped around her middle, "You and Richie *aren't* dating?"

Richie guffaws and Eddie's face turns into a hilariously shocked one before he realizes she's only teasing him. He rolls his eyes as Richie places a gross, wet kiss on his cheek, "He's playing the hard-to-get game."

Matt shows up about twenty minutes late, cutting the time he has to meet Eddie's friends even shorter. Eddie figures it's probably because of traffic, but he doesn't let it sour his mood. He opens the door and hugs him, pecking him on the lips- because he's finally brave enough to do that. Everyone greets Matt enthusiastically, shaking his hand or pulling him in for a hug. Matt is well-built from running track, slim and tall with muscular legs and a broad back. He dresses nicely and

his hair is always styled well *and* he prefers to be clean-shaven, which is a huge bonus. Eddie *hates* facial hair. He wouldn't admit it, but he feels a little bit of guilty pride that he managed to snag someone as sexy as Matt and he wants to show him off to everyone he meets.

"Eddie's been talking about you nonstop for *weeks*, " Stan smiles, "I'm starting to go crazy."

A small smile uncovers the dimple hiding on Matt's cheek and Eddie beams, "It's true, I talk about you all the time."

"Good," Matt chuckles and it warms Eddie's heart, "I want everyone to know that this sweet thing is mine."

Eddie feels Richie's hand slide casually over his shoulder, reaching up to quickly pinch his cheek. Eddie immediately squawks and bats his hand away, "I've been curious to see who's special enough to steal Eddie Spaghetti's heart," Richie says, but he's smiling down at Eddie while he talks.

"Huh," Matt says, his arm wrapping around Eddie's shoulders, "I thought you didn't like nicknames, babe."

Eddie doesn't miss the way Richie's face tightens like he's just sucked on a lemon. Richie is generally unperturbed by someone not liking his jokes or nicknames, so it strikes Eddie as odd. He quirks a brow up at Richie before nuzzling his face into Matt's chest, "It doesn't matter how many times I tell this dumbass I hate his awful nicknames, he still calls me them."

Matt laughs again, "He's easy to rile up, isn't he?" He asks Richie. There's a beat before Eddie feels Richie ruffle his hair. Matt presses him closer to his chest.

"Yeah, he is," Richie answers. Eddie feels a little flustered that they're talking about him like he's not even there, but when he turns to look at Richie he's looking down at him with a soft smile and sparkle in his eye.

"Eddie says you run track, too?" Bill asks suddenly. Eddie jerks his

head in Bill and Mike's direction suddenly, he almost forgot there were others in the room.

"Yeah! I've been doing it since Freshman year of high school," Matt says, and it shows. He's an amazing runner, *almost* as good as Eddie. He prides himself on the fact that he can outrun someone who has been practicing for nearly seven years, "Eddie came along and suddenly I wasn't the best anymore, can you believe it? No previous experience and this little bugger can outrun *me*."

"I could let you win, if it would make you feel better," Eddie teases, but Matt doesn't laugh.

"I should get going, I'll be late for work. Text me when you get home, okay?" When Eddie nods Matt presses a kiss to his forehead that Richie makes overdramatic gagging noises about, "Seriously, don't stay out too late. We have that track meet on campus tomorrow at 8 in the morning and I want you in tiptop condition."

"Sir, yes sir," Eddie jokes, and again, Matt doesn't laugh. Eddie frowns. He almost always laughs at Eddie's teasing and jokes. He leaves the apartment as quickly as he came, several seconds of silence following, "So, what did you think?"

"He's nice," Stan says, but his lips are pursed and Eddie really wishes Matt had put a little more effort into getting to know his friends. He's the kindest, funniest guy when it's just the two of them, and he really wanted his friends to be happy for him.

"I think he was tired tonight," Eddie wants to brush his behavior off, but he can't help but feel like he did something wrong. He admonishes himself for being so insecure. It wasn't *his* fault.

"You didn't tell me you have a track meet tomorrow, Eds! Why didn't you invite me? I wanna see all your sexy teammates in running shorts," Eddie is instantly annoyed when Richie tosses an arm over his shoulder.

"I didn't invite you because I don't want anyone knowing I associate myself with *you*," Eddie grumbles, Richie just squeezes his shoulder tighter. Of course, that's not true. Eddie didn't invite anyone because

he didn't think they would want to go. It's kind of boring, really, to watch a bunch of people run really fast. The last thing his friends would want to do is get up at 8 AM on the weekend to do that.

"I don't blame you," Bev says with her signature smirk that Eddie has come to love. She reaches past him to mess up Richie's hair, grinning when he squirms out from under her touch.

"I'd love to be at one of your meets sometime," Mike smiles, and Eddie thanks his lucky stars that he has such awesome friends. They have all the time in the world to get to know Matt, later. Eddie just wants to enjoy his time with his friends without worrying, so he presses in between Stan and Richie on the couch and sinks back into a relaxed state surrounded by their warm bodies and Richie's constant chattering in his ear. And when Richie tosses a blanket over the both of them, how could he find it in him to worry?

The nerves Eddie feels before his very first meet are through the roof. He doesn't think he's ever felt this nauseous in his life, and he doesn't even know why. It's not like he's expecting much, this is his *first* meet, and he's really just excited to be competing at all. There's no reason for him to be nervous, and yet, he is. When he gets out of his dorm hall and is met with fresh, crisp air, his stomach settles a little. The sun is out but the air is nipping at his cheeks and it takes the edge off of his stomachache. It's an indoor meet, though, and he worries that the fluorescent lights will make him feel even worse.

They don't.

Once he starts to feel better, it only goes up from there. He starts to feel the competitive streak that's always been there, but has never been allowed out in the open before. Video games were the closest he could get to something like this, and now he's *here*, finally getting to *compete*. He's so excited he almost doesn't hear someone calling his name.

"Eddie, hey!" Matt calls out to him, jogging over and stretching out

his quads, “Are you nervous?”

“A little,” Eddie admits, “But I’m mostly just excited,” Matt smiles and pecks him on the cheek.

“You didn’t stay out too late, did you?” He asks, and Eddie feels a surge of butterflies. It’s nice to have someone who cares about his well-being.

“No, I left the apartment at 11:30 and went to bed right away. A solid eight hours,” He reaches down to stretch out his calves, but stops when he sees Matt’s frown, “What?”

“That’s pretty late. It takes you at least 20 minutes to drive to your dorm from their apartment complex. That means you probably didn’t get to bed until midnight and you were texting me at 7am this morning, so you’re lying.”

Eddie laughs uncomfortably and furrows his eyebrows, “I’m not *lying*, Matt.” He’s cut off by someone hollering his name from the stands. He turns to see all of his friends waving at him, big grins plastered on their faces. And, of course, Richie’s holding a giant sign that reads ‘Rapido, Spaghetti!’

Eddie doesn’t think he’s ever been this excited in his life. He’s ready to work his ass off and lose miserably, and still be happy despite that because he’s never been allowed to do anything like this before.

He wins. He wins. He *fucking* wins the last event of the day, the 800m.

There’s a lot of yelling, both happy and upset. He’s sweating and he feels so dizzy he can hardly see, but he can feel the slaps on his back and hear a few different people congratulating him.

He’s nearly knocked over by the force of Richie hugging him, quickly followed by Bill, Stan, Mike, Ben, and Bev.

“I think Richie should be on the track team! I’ve never seen him run as fast as he did to get down from the stands!” Mike laughs in his ear and Eddie’s cheeks start to hurt from how much he’s smiling. If his mom was here right now, she’d be swallowing his pride whole,

insisting he was fragile and weak and asthmatic. His friends make him feel like he's on top of the world, though, and Richie goes as far as to lift him up and put him on his shoulders like he's the star of the football team.

"Put me down, you fucking weirdo!" He shouts, landing playful smacks on the top of his head. As people file out of the gym they give the two of them weird looks. The rest of his friends just laugh their asses off and egg Richie's goofy personality on. Stan, who was lovely enough to bring a digital camera with him, snaps a picture of the two of them.

"I'm never putting you down! I have to show the whole wide world how cool my best-"

"Eddie, congratulations," Matt cuts in, effectively shutting Richie up. Eddie settles his hands in Richie's curls without thinking about it, smiling down at Matt.

"Thanks, babe! You did so good today! I wish you had won so I could've been behind you the whole time," He winks flirtatiously and feels Richie's hands squeeze his calves, "Am I getting too heavy?"

"You weigh three pounds. You're about the size of a chihuahua. You're as mean as one, too," Eddie tugs on his hair sharply in response and grins when Richie smacks his leg, "See? I told you-*mean*."

"Hey, I'm going to head home, okay?" Matt speaks up, picking his gym bag up off the ground.

"Aw, are you sure? Why don't we all go out to brunch to celebrate?" He looks around at all of his friends who enthusiastically agree and he feels Richie's curls brush against his thighs as he nods.

"I don't usually celebrate the first meet of the year. It's not as important as the other ones," Matt answers, "Call me later, okay?"

Eddie pushes away his disappointment, distracting himself by pulling gently on Richie's hair and watching as it springs back on his head, "What a douche," Richie grumbles, the vibrations of his voice

traveling through Eddie's legs.

"He's not a douche, he's just upset he didn't win," Eddie replies as Richie starts to carry him out of the gym. Faintly, he hears Stan, Bill, and Mike debating the best place to go for breakfast.

"I know, but *you* won, his *boyfriend*. He should be proud of you," Richie's hands tighten around his ankles and Eddie knows he's right. But Matt *is* proud of him, right? He congratulated him, and he seemed genuinely happy for him, didn't he? As if sensing his inner turmoil, Richie speaks up again, "Hey, I'm not trying to make you upset, okay?" He lets Eddie slide down his back and onto the ground, wrapping his arm around his shoulders and keeping up his pace with the rest of the group, "Let's forget about it. It's pancake time!"

Brunch is fantastic, with lots of laughter and mimosas- Richie sneaks him one since he's not yet 21. Matt agrees to meet him at his dorm later that night for a little one-on-one time. When he gets back to his dorm room, he goes the extra mile in the shower in hopes that the night might take an extra... *celebratory* turn, considering his roommate is out of town for a family emergency. They haven't done much beyond long makeout sessions that occasionally get heated enough to where he needs to take a shower to cool down, because he was too nervous to do anything *too* serious.

Tonight, though, he's feeling on top of the world.

Matt shows up with TacoBell that Eddie had requested, as it was always the treat he was allowed to have when he got especially good grades growing up. Eddie tackles him almost immediately with hugs and kisses. Something he's discovered about himself over the past several weeks is that he's pretty affectionate, which makes up for his constant sassy banter. They kiss deeply, Eddie's hands coming up to scratch at the small amount of stubble on Matt's jawline.

"Hey babe," Matt greets him with a smile, wrapping his arms around his middle and squeezing him tight, "How was brunch this morning?"

"It was amazing! We should go there sometime for a date," He closes his eyes when Matt presses a kiss to his forehead and lays his head against his chest.

"Sorry I didn't go. I just get worked up after meets, you know?" One of his hands smooths down Eddie's hair, "Could you give me a breather for a second? I need to set the food down," He chuckles to himself when Eddie apologizes and steps back. Eddie's eyes follow him as he sets the food down on the nearby table. The room was clean, almost perfect. Without his roommate there, he had no clutter or dirty laundry scattered around the room. He could keep it as clean as he wanted to.

"It's okay, I get it. I wish you could've come, though. We had an *amazing* time. Richie was laughing so hard at one point his mimosa went out of his nose, it was *disgusting*," He smiles fondly, even though he'd been incredibly grossed out at Richie's snot juice ending up all over his arm. He grabs a soft taco out of the bag Matt brought and collapses onto the couch.

"Richie, that's the curly-haired one, right?" Eddie nods, "I don't like him all that much. He's kind of... weird?" Matt makes his way over to the couch and settles in next to him. Eddie smiles at that. Richie is weird. He's the weirdest person he's ever met, but he's funny and charming and so, so kind. It's ridiculous, really, because he kind of drives Eddie crazy with his dumb jokes and nicknames, but despite all of his annoyance his face still hurts from how much he's smiling.

"Yeah, Rich is weird," Eddie agrees, "but that's part of his charm. You'll get used to it."

"Speaking of his charm," Matt clears his throat, "I don't like the way he acts around you. I mean, picking you up like that *in front* of your boyfriend? You should watch yourself around him, Eddie. I don't blame him, the poor dude probably fell in love with your legs when he saw you walking around in those shorts all the time."

For the first time, Eddie feels *truly* uncomfortable around Matt. He's felt nervous on dates and shy when they first started kissing, but now he feels sick-to-his-stomach, heart-in-his-throat uncomfortable. He tugs on the bottom of his shorts self-consciously and crosses his legs.

Nobody ever has talked about him that way, like he's an object. Should he be flattered? It *was* a compliment, wasn't it? But no, it wasn't. He was making Richie out to be some fucking pervert, like he only hangs out around Eddie because he finds him attractive, and that's the furthest thing from the truth. Right?

"He's just... a touchy guy, Matt. He's like that with all of our friends, too."

"Oh, come on," Matt laughs, but it sounds humorless, "You can't be serious! The way that guy looks at you is ridiculous! And you just *let* him. It's disrespectful to me, your *boyfriend*."

Eddie feels something snap inside of him, like a rubber band gun shooting off.

"Are you kidding me? First of all, Richie is my *friend*, and that's not going to change anytime soon. Second of all, it's not *my* fault even if he *was* looking at me that way!" He sits up straighter on the couch and tosses his barely eaten taco on the coffee table, fists clenching in his lap. He can't believe Matt could honestly sit there and say those things about his friends, and more importantly, about *him*.

"It *is* your fault! You walk around like a little *whore* constantly! Why the fuck do you think you even caught my eye in the first place?"

Eddie has been angry before. He's yelled at his mom and bullies and even a teacher at one point, but he's never been this kind of angry in his life. The level of rage coursing through his veins burns in unmatched fury.

"Get out! Take your fucking taco and get the fuck out!" To punctuate his statement, he picks up one of the tacos in the bag and throws it at Matt, allowing himself to feel a bit of happiness as it hits him square in the face.

Matt rushes out of his dorm in a flurry, yelling insults Eddie tries to not listen to and hopes the other people in the dorm can't hear. As soon as he's gone, he's texting Eddie more insults and lengthy paragraphs that Eddie ignores, opting to bury his head under his pillow and try not to cry. It's not working. He picks up his phone

after about twenty minutes.

“Are you calling to make fun of me for shooting a mimosa through my nose again ?” Richie says as soon as he answers and Eddie laughs, but it sounds wet and sad. Richie notices instantly, *“Is everything okay? You sound sick.”*

“I’m not sick, no. I just...” He trails off, using the sleeves of the hoodie he’s wearing to dab at tears that threaten to fall, “Can I spend the night at your place?”

There’s a long pause before Richie speaks again, *“This sounds like a night that calls for a pint of ice cream, am I right?”*

Eddie nods stupidly into the phone, swallowing around a sob. He snuffles and tries to regulate his breathing, “Yes, please.”

“Take a taxi over here and I’ll make a quick trip to the store across the street. Any special flavor requests?”

If Eddie had his own car, he’d have been at Richie and Bill’s apartment in record time. He doesn’t though, so he has to take the world’s slowest taxi and tries not to cry in the back of it for the full twenty minute ride. By the time he arrives at the apartment, he’s spent. Bill answers the door and pulls him into a wordless side-hug, squeezing Eddie’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry for inviting myself over-” Eddie starts, but Bill cuts him off quickly.

“Mi casa es tu casa,” He says, and it’s meant to be funny but it comes out soft and warm and Eddie moves so their hug is a full-body hug. He begs his eyes not to well up with tears and for once, they listen.

“Thank you, Bill.”

“IS THAT MY EDDIE SPAGHETTI?” Richie hollers from his bedroom, sliding down the length of the hallway on his socks, coming to a stop

just in front of Eddie and Bill. He takes one look at his face before wrapping him in a bear hug that Eddie pretends to resist against before giving in, wrapping his own arms around Richie's middle and pressing his face against his chest. Richie smells like mildew, probably from leaving his laundry in the wash for too long, and he's wearing only boxers and a *Risky Business* shirt, but he feels like coming home.

Bill awkwardly cuts in, "I'm heading out for the night, kiddos. There's a party Audra invited me to. I'd stay but I ditched her *last* time she invited me to a party and I still haven't heard the end of it. Be good, don't stay up too late," He looks pointedly at Richie, "Be *nice*. "

Eddie watches his face from where he's still tucked against his side, smiling when Richie scoffs, a hand landing on his chest, "Bill, I am the nicest man in the world, a true gentleman."

And he really is. When he took a trip to the store, he purchased ice cream, tissues, and boxing gloves, just to make Eddie laugh. He asks no questions beyond '*It was Matt, wasn't it?*' and he distracts him with video games and stupid jokes.

Richie keeps his mind off of his problems pretty well, until he checks his texts and sees everything Matt has been sending him since he kicked him out of his dorm. He goes through the three most recent texts.

Matt @ 9:57pm

You owe me an apology, I'm not coming back until I get one.

Matt @ 10:13pm

I guess I dodged a bullet with you, huh? You act like such a whore but you won't even put out.

Matt @ 10:35pm

Just wait until everyone on the team hears about how fucking heartless you are.

Eddie stares at the phone, light fracturing when his vision clouds

with tears. Richie, who was enthusiastically chattering about the movie on the screen, whips his head to the left and stares at Eddie with wide eyes.

“Are you crying, Eds?” He asks gingerly, gaze flicking down to the phone in his hands, “No, give that to me. I am not letting that sorry motherfucker make you cry again.”

Eddie wants to protest, but he can’t find the words and he allows Richie to take the phone from him and toss it onto the carpeted floor. He slumps against Richie’s side, head cradled by his shoulder and the couch cushions. He sadly watches Richie’s slim fingers dance in the space between the two of them, unsure of where to settle. Eddie’s not sure what to say or do, either.

“Apres la pluie le beau temps,” Richie says, like he’s actually supposed to know what that means. When Eddie lifts his head off of his shoulder and raises an eyebrow at him, Richie continues, “My mom always says that. It means ‘After the rain, nice weather’,” He smiles shyly, “This is nice, yeah?” He sends a gesture around the length of the room, where snacks and ice cream cartons have been scattered.

He puffs out a breath of air, smiling in spite of his red eyes, “This is really nice, thank you,”

As if on cue, Richie’s ringtone cuts through the air. He checks the phone and declines the call. Eddie doesn’t even need to ask at this point to know that it must’ve been his mother.

Without hesitating, Eddie readjusts himself so he can flop his upper half in Richie’s lap dramatically, “I’m not sure if I should be sad or angry.”

His mind has been bouncing back and forth between those two emotions all night long. He’s pissed, but something inside of him tells him that maybe he was overreacting. Matt has had far more relationship experience than Eddie, who had never been on a date before. Maybe this was normal behavior.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Richie offers, tugging softly on

Eddie's hair that had begun to curl into waves over the past few weeks. It's longer than it has ever been before but he likes the texture of it when it grows out, "Maybe I can tell you if you should be sad or angry."

"It's so fucking stupid," Eddie groans, throwing an arm over his eyes.

"Try me, Spaghetti."

Eddie considers whether he should tell Richie the honest story, "He was jealous..." He starts quietly, not moving his arm. He doesn't want to look Richie in the eyes, "...of you."

He feels Richie's breathing stop, the hand in his hair going still. He waits several moments before peering under his arm to look at him.

"I'm so sorry," Richie breathes. His eyes search Eddie's face curiously, "I didn't mean to start an argument between you two. I could tell he was pissed when I put you on my shoulders, but I'm like that with everybody. Ask Stan! It's not like I'm interested in you or anything like that-" He cuts himself off then, worry flickering across his face, "-Not that I wouldn't be! Fuck, that sounds weird. I just mean, I don't think you're ugly or anything I'm just not-"

"Oh my god! Can it, Tozier!" Eddie finally shouts, laughter bubbling from his chest, "I didn't ask you to marry me, relax!" His ribs hurt from the giggles flowing out of them, and he ignores the twinge in his chest from Richie's rejection.

"Sorry," Richie says yet again, face flushing but there's a smile dancing on his face. His hand finally resumes playing with Eddie's hair, "Do you want me to call him and tell him that there's nothing going on with us? Maybe it will help."

Eddie hums and pushes his head into Richie's hand, "No, I think that would just make it worse. He..." He closes his eyes against the burning of his cheeks, "He said it was my fault. That I 'act like a whore'."

Humiliation courses through his veins. He feels indignant and angry, but part of him wonders if it's true. He wonders if Richie will think

less of him for letting someone speak to him that way. Richie's hand stills yet again, flexing out and into a fist, "Angry," He says.

"What?"

"You should be angry. You should be pissed," He continues, "That is not even *close* to okay."

Silence coats the room like a blanket. His heart has gone still in his chest. The hum of the TV makes his head feel fuzzy.

"You're biased because you like me so much," He replies, because it's all he can think to say. It's not untrue, either. This doesn't seem to be enough for Richie, though, because when Eddie opens his eyes and sits up he can see that his gaze has gone narrow behind his glasses, cutting like a knife.

"Yeah, I fucking am, and he should be, too. If I wouldn't say that to you because I'm your friend, he certainly shouldn't say that to you because he's your *boyfriend*," Eddie wonders how he can look so angry and so *soft* at the same time, but he does. His eyes are narrowed but soft around the edges, somehow enveloping him in comfort without moving a muscle, "He shouldn't want to hurt you, Eds. If he was here right now I'd punch him so--"

"What, with your scrawny chicken arms?" Eddie cuts in. Richie deflates all at once.

"You know, *some* people find my scrawny chicken arms sexy," The glint in his eyes returns and Eddie is thankful for the detour in the conversation.

"Some people find *feet* sexy, Richie. That proves nothing."

"Oh, so you're saying *you* find feet sexy?" He counters, rolling onto his back and shoving his feet into Eddie's face. He knocks himself sideways onto the couch trying to avoid his smelly, hairy, giant-sized feet.

"You're so gross! You probably have feet STDs!" Richie squawks a laugh at that, flopping around on his back like a fish as he tries to push his feet closer.

"If I do, they're from your mother!" He readjusts himself as he responds, shifting up and lunging forward to tickle Eddie's sides which results in screams and flailing limbs. Richie grins evilly above him, brown hair tickling Eddie's face and glasses sliding down his nose.

"I *will* punch you again! Do not test me, Tozier!" Richie just smiles brighter and leans in closer, until he finally gets tired and leaves his hands to rest on Eddie's ribs. Faintly, he wonders if he can feel his heart racing. Even if he could feel it through his soft hoodie, he'd probably just think it was from the tickling. But no, Eddie realizes with a start, it's from something much different, something he can't place. It's from watching Richie's freckled face turn from evil to sweet and gentle in a matter of seconds, eyes growing sleepy under his glasses. It's from their proximity, Richie's hot breath blowing over his lips and neck. It's from something Eddie would rather not dwell on much longer.

After a wrestling competition, during which Richie accuses him of cheating, they finally agree that it's time to go to bed. Bill wanders in with Audra just as they escape to the safety of Richie's room.

"Trust me, you do *not* want to overhear the kinky shit Bill and her get up to," Richie says, shutting and locking the door for good measure.

They change into pajamas, brush their teeth, and wash their faces (well, just Eddie because Richie only believes in minimal hygiene). There's no sleeping bags, so Eddie is left with the choice of sleeping on the hard floor or the couch, dangerously close to Bill's room on the other side of the house. Eddie's not exactly sure he believes Richie about the kinky sex, but he's certain that's exactly what college-aged couples do all night every night. All college couples except him, apparently. He tries not to think about Matt's texts.

"Eds, there's no way in hell I'm letting you nurse your broken heart all by yourself on the couch. You take the bed, I can sleep on the floor," Richie interrupts his train of thought, taking a few pillows off of his unmade bed and tossing them onto the floor next to it.

"No, that's not fair to you. I could've just stayed in my dorm, but I came over here and forced you to spend all night with me. I'm not

going to take your bed, too,” He moves from where he’s sitting at the foot of the bed, and makes his way over to Richie, “Plus, it’s so unhealthy to sleep on the floor. Well, there’s contradicting studies on that, but-”

“I really don’t need a lesson on sleeping studies right now,” Richie rolls his eyes dramatically, “You get the bed, end of story,” To prove his point, he pushes Eddie’s chest, causing him to stumble and fall back onto the mattress. Eddie huffs loudly, but relents. He fixes his position on the bed, watching Richie go to turn the light out with a *click*.

“We’re being stupid,” He says suddenly, into the dark of the room. He can hear Richie padding around on the carpet and for some reason the sound wraps around him like a soft blanket.

“Oh? Usually you only say *I’m* being stupid, not both of us,” Richie responds. Eddie can faintly see the outline of him hovering next to the bed, placing his glasses on the nightstand. He blinks a few times so his eyes can adjust to the dim lighting.

“This is a queen bed, why can’t we just share it? We’re friends,” Eddie says, and when Richie doesn’t respond for a moment he begins to worry that maybe there *was* a good reason not to share a bed.

But then, “You’re right. Budge over, pumpkin.”

Eddie goes hot at the pet name but moves over anyway. The bed dips next to him and he watches the dark outline of Richie settle into the bed. As he settles his head against the pillow, Eddie can see the contour of every one of his curls. Briefly, he wonders what Richie looks like when he wakes up first thing in the morning- he remembers how his moms curly hair always ended up in a big, frizzy poof on her head by the morning. He wonders if Richie looks the same, hair all splayed out on his pillow, probably reminiscent of a llama with the frizz and drool. He smiles to himself at the thought of it.

As his eyes trace the slope of his nose, he realizes that it’s so quiet in the room he can hear the sound of Richie’s breathing. He hopes he can’t see him staring in the dim light of the room, but then he

remembers that Richie took his glasses off and is nearly legally blind without them. He's free to stare as long as he wants.

Wait.

Why does he want to stare?

Eddie blinks in the dark, so stunned that his train of thought comes to a halt like the conductor had pulled the emergency brakes. Something dark and disturbing settles into his gut, something that feels like guilt. Why does he want to stare? *Why does he want to stare?*

"You're awfully quiet, Eds. I'd ask if a cat's got your tongue but I know you have no interest in cats," Richie snorts at his own joke, but Eddie swallows nervously. He has to say something, anything to distract from the real reason he was so quiet.

"You know, my mom never let me have a sleepover. This is the first time I've ever slept over at someone else's house," He admits into the air of the room. It sounds choked and he prays that Richie can't hear the nerves in his voice.

"Aw, darlin'," Richie says in his terrible Southern Belle impression. He sounds an awful lot like Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and for a moment Eddie imagines Richie all dressed up in a white dress and boa, "I'm honored to take your sleepover virginity."

Eddie reaches out to shove him, laughing when Richie grabs at his hands before he can, tugging him closer. There's suddenly almost no distance between the two of them, the sheets straining on his legs, diagonal across the bed and his head almost on Richie's pillow. Richie turns and Eddie's heart jumps when he sees his nose is almost close enough to touch his own. He's staring at Eddie, but his eyes are unfocused, just roaming around his features.

"We should go out for breakfast tomorrow," He says, breath hot on Eddie's lips, "Or, better yet, I could make breakfast! You will die and go to heaven when you taste my chocolate chip pancakes."

Eddie winces, "I can't. I have a class early tomorrow," He frowns when Richie's excitement fades away, "But maybe you could pick me

up afterwards... if you want to do something then? I'm done with my shift at Kroger's at 2."

Richie smiles and Eddie desperately tries to ignore the way his body feels like jelly at the sight of his crinkling eyes, "Yeah, I'll pick you up right after my class."

"Okay," Is all Eddie can bring himself to say, fighting against the smile making its way onto his face. And the air is so warm and so happy and so filled with relief after he had such a shitty night that he falls asleep before he can even consider that he's too close, so close that he can count every freckle on Richie's face even in the dim light of the bedroom.

Working at a grocery store on a Monday means there's a lot of time for thinking. Way too much time. He thinks about Matt for a good chunk of time, about how angry he is and how he should definitely ask Richie to help him key his car. There's a little part of him gnawing at the corner of his brain that blames himself, that tells him it's his fault, and that he's completely *unlovable*. And really, how is he supposed to argue with that? His first boyfriend- the first person he'd been on a date with, the first person he'd told some of his weirdest thoughts to- ended up hating him within a matter of weeks. He was in his third year of college and hadn't even, as Matt said it, *put out*. Maybe he *was* too high maintenance, too uptight. Maybe he really was too much for anybody to deal with aside from his mother.

Before he can feel too sorry for himself, his thoughts shift to Richie, how badly he'd wanted to stare at him and trace over his lips and nose and cheekbones with his eyes for as long as he could. How close they were and how much Richie makes him smile and how when they woke up one of Richie's arms was slung around his waist. He thinks about how quickly he'd bolted away and how guilty he felt and he knows, he *knows* that there's something dangerous forming inside of him.

But he also knows that he smiles bigger than he probably ever has

when Richie pulls up in his rusty, orange truck outside of his work, honking and yelling ‘Eddie Spaghetti!’ with his dumb glasses and messy hair and crooked grin. He knows that nothing feels better than climbing into that truck and having his cheek pinched all while pretending he hates it, hates his nicknames and jokes and loud mouth, but they both know, they *know* that it’s not the truth and there is something different there.

And then, “So, you’re cheating on me with Richie, now?”

Eddie’s head whips around and his smile grows even wider when he sees Stan in the backseat. He has his backpack on the seat next to him, meaning he was likely coming back from class with Richie.

“Stan! Hey!” He greets him as Richie starts to drive them back home.

“Richie told me what happened with Matt. I’m so, so sorry. I just...” He shakes his head, like he’s clearing his thoughts away, “I’m glad you spent the night with Richie. You shouldn’t have had to spend the night alone after that.”

Stan smiles, but Eddie feels a bit guilty. Stan and Richie live in the same apartment complex, he could have gone to Stan just as easily. He frowns, “I’m sorry I didn’t go to your place. What happened with Matt, it was-”

“Eddie,” Stan holds a hand up, “It’s *okay*.”

And that’s the end of that.

Any guilt Eddie may have been feeling previously is swallowed by the screams of laughter and video game music, Stan shutting off Eddie’s phone to keep Matt from texting or calling yet *again*, and Bill eventually calling Matt himself and shouting every curse word in the dictionary at him.

Halfway through a raucous round of giggles, with his head on Stan’s shoulder and Richie using his thigh as a rest for his hands as he

plays video games, he realizes that he used to always have to deal with pain like this alone. When something happened to him when he was a kid, like when he was unrelentingly bullied, he would have to go home and go straight to his room to cry by himself for hours. To make it worse, he had to cry as quietly as possible just to ensure that his mother never heard him and had a chance to overreact and take him to the hospital. He had to go through so much pain alone, but now he was surrounded by friends who refused to leave his side. Even Bev, Ben, and Mike- who were all busy with work and school- were texting the group nonstop to check in on him. It was all overwhelming, really, that in a few short weeks he had become part of a new family, one that would never hurt him, never let him down, and never abandon him. He didn't need Matt or his mom, he found everything he needed in his amazing friends.

When Richie starts loudly complaining about being hungry, Stan offers to go get takeout from The Super Dragon and Richie promises eternal servitude in exchange for his favorite mushroom chicken. Stan promises Eddie can have the entire store for free if that's what he wants, and Bill begs Stan to stop at McDonalds because he hates Chinese food with a passion and would give his first born for a cheeseburger. It's all very dramatic, but in the end, everyone gets what they want. They send Stan on his way with the list of requests written out on a notecard and return to their '\$#@! Matt' Party, as Richie had titled it.

And if you had told Eddie that it was about to be one of the worst nights of his life, he would have never believed it. But this moment, on Richie's bed with his head in Richie's lap and a smile on both their faces, is when the world splits.

The phone rings through the house and he stops to turn his head in the direction of the sound. It's the wall phone, so Richie brushes it off and tells him that it's probably Georgie calling for Bill. Bill inevitably answers, and everything starts to happen in slow motion, like a scene in a movie when the music cuts out. Richie's hand is carding through his hair like it's second nature, waiting to hear Bill's joyous greeting of the caller. The phone in the kitchen is too far away to hear what Bill is saying, but he's quiet- and that's enough to signal that the caller is, at the very least, a stranger. There's a beat.

“Rich? Your Dad is calling for you!” Bill shouts from the kitchen. Richie sighs dramatically, but Eddie only hears the tone of his voice. It’s not right. If he could go back, he might tell Richie not to go get it. Maybe he would’ve just asked him to stay a moment longer, so he could crack a joke and make him laugh. If he could go back, he’s not sure what he’d do, but he doesn’t get to consider it because Richie slides down the hallway in socked feet.

Eddie sits for three seconds before finally making the decision to pad down the hallway himself and peek around the divider into the kitchen. Bill is still there, standing behind Richie apprehensively.

“Daddio, it’s your lovely son speaking,” Richie says with no smile on his face. He twirls the cord around his finger and Eddie watches it go round and round and round until it stops with a sharp intake of breath through Richie’s mouth.

“That’s not...” Richie stares at the wall, then laughs. Eddie is startled when it sours into a grimace, then a choked sob, “Dad, no.”

He doesn’t even get a chance to think before Richie’s on the ground like someone kicked his legs out from under him. He’s on his knees, not breathing, not speaking, just threading his fingers through his hair and bending over until his forehead presses against the kitchen tile. Eddie stands, completely frozen, not even breathing. Three seconds pass, three *slow, pained* seconds pass before a screamed cry comes out and all the air leaves Richie’s body in one go. It’s the loudest sound he’s ever heard in his life, like he’s been shot. His ears ring and he makes a sound that sounds like a cry but no tears are falling because his brain is malfunctioning. The scream shoves him into action, finally diving onto the ground even though they’ve probably never swept it the entire time they’ve been there because Richie is *broken* and surely the world is ending. He pats his shaky hands along his whole body, afraid to touch but afraid to let go. Something is wrong, something is so fucking wrong. Something is wrong and Eddie can’t *fix* it.

Bill moves next, straight to the phone, but he has to bend awkwardly around the two of them huddled on the floor to reach it where it’s dangling.

“Went?” He calls into the receiver urgently, “Went, it’s Bill... Richie’s roommate... What happened?”

Richie finally pulls back off the floor and now that Eddie can finally see his face, he wishes he couldn’t. Snot and tears run down his face, so scrunched up he’s hardly recognizable and before he can even think, Eddie pulls the glasses off and throws them somewhere, anywhere. He thumbs at his wet cheeks but it’s no use because more tears are falling.

“Bill?” He asks, because Bill has been quiet for way too fucking long and he’s worried maybe he’ll have a meltdown, too.

He looks up to see Bill’s face, white as a ghost, just as Richie ducks his head down into the juncture between Eddie’s neck and shoulder, crushing his middle with long arms.

“His mom...” Bill says, and Richie crushes him more, “She had a stroke and she died.”

If Eddie’s heart was made of glass, like his Ma had always insisted it was, it would have probably shattered. Eddie wishes, for the first time in his life, that it really *was* made of glass, because perhaps it would have given out and he wouldn’t have to feel *this*, the horror of seeing the strongest person you know crumble like chalk.

Eddie barely feels Bill settle around the two of them, pressing his face into Eddie’s hair and adding to the pressure around Eddie’s chest. Nobody says a word, because what is there to say?

With one hand he cradles Richie’s head to his chest, because he’s 20, and it’s all he knows how to do. He’s 20, and he’s never seen this before. The *moment*. He’s never been there for the call, the last breath. He saw police placing a sheet over the victim of a hit and run once, and it had struck him to the core that he’d never seen a dead person until then, but beyond that, he’d never seen the *pain* of death. He’d lived through what comes after, the slow, monotonous depression. It was all he’d ever known, after his father lost his fight with cancer. His mom was the embodiment of loss. But still, he hadn’t been there when she’d heard the news. Or maybe he had, and he was too young to remember, or he’d blocked it out.

But now, with a sobbing man in his arms, he realizes he's never seen anything like this before.

So he cries too.

He clutches onto the sweater Richie's wearing, twists it between his hands without thinking. He's never seen him crumble this way before. He's never seen him cry, *ever*. Eddie sobs into his curls and desperately tries to bring him closer. His mouth is wet with spit and tears as he presses it against Richie's head, not to kiss, only to remind him he's there, only to bring him even closer.

The front door opens and closes, and a voice cuts through the deathly quiet home, "What the fuck is going on?" He can't see around Bill but he's certain Stan has just come back from picking up the takeout, "Billy, what happened?"

The sounds of Stan's scuffling feet meet his ears just as he sees Bill grab onto his hand and pull him down to his knees. A new pair of arms wrap around all of them and the air goes still again. Maybe Bill explains what happened- Eddie doesn't think he would have heard him if he did. It feels as though hours go by as they sit there, completely silent, Stan thumbing away tears on Richie's face with an affection Eddie has never seen him use before, Bill holding onto one of Eddie's shaking hands as though it might fly away, and Richie holding onto Eddie so tight it's surprising his ribs don't shatter and puncture his lungs.

It's Richie, of course, who finally breaks the silence.

"The food's probably fuckin' cold by now," He announces, and his voice is so hoarse and broken that it doesn't come out as funny as he probably meant it to.

No one really knows what to do for several moments, before Eddie looks down and sees Richie's apprehensive face. He looks lost, scrambling for any sense of normalcy. So, Eddie allows himself to chuckle, though it sounds wet and gross, and is relieved when Richie's smiles sadly up at him because at least it's something. Because, as much as he'd like to think the world should stop turning for sorrow like this, it doesn't. He pulls Richie into a hug again, his

cheek pressing solidly against his head.

“Let’s eat, okay?” Eddie says, voice barely a whisper, and he feels Richie nod against him.

Eddie knows, with absolute certainty, that nothing will ever be the same.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

“Stay?” He requests tenderly.

And Eddie isn't sure exactly what he means, how long he wants Eddie to lay there with him. But he knows this: he would stay with Richie as long as he asked, he would do anything for him if he smiled the way he is now. He would lay there for years, with Richie's hand on his arm, and Richie's breath flowing across the side of his face, and Richie's smell overwhelming all of his other senses. He would leave, too, if that's what Richie wanted. He would do anything.

Because he loves him, more than he thinks he's ever loved anything before.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm back! Sorry it's been so long since the last chapter, but I'm glad I made the decision to continue this. I think it mostly turned out pretty good, I hope you all agree!

Also, I made a Spotify playlist specifically for this chapter, if you want to listen while you read.

The artwork for the playlist is by @edward-tozier on tumblr (she's phenomenal, please check her work out) because it is exactly how I imagine them in this story.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0X8DjKsQO8VDxMd2cAmyjY?si=camRLlqeR--JEYXb1bHksQ>

Nothing is the same.

Richie flies home immediately, all the way back to sunny Los Angeles to bury his mother at only twenty-one years old. Eddie wants to tell him to call or text or send a postcard or *something*, but he doesn't think asking anything of him right now is a good idea. Instead, he

helps him pack his bags, pulls him in for a tight hug, and waves goodbye as he gets into a taxi headed for the airport.

He misses Richie so much and he hates himself for it. He *shouldn't* miss Richie, he doesn't get to miss Richie, not when he's going through this tragedy.

So, he keeps himself from reaching out or calling. He wants Richie to feel like he can take all the time he needs, to not feel rushed to get back to New York.

He has his own shit to worry about, anyway. There was a track meet immediately following Richie's departure, and he had to ignore Matt's occasional snide comments and the curious questions from the rest of the team. It was torture, knowing Matt's laughter across the field was probably pointed at him. And Eddie doesn't like to blab about his relationship problems to all of his teammates, so there's only one side of the story out there- and who knows what that side of the story sounds like. If they *did* know the truth, nobody would talk to Matt again, but Eddie keeps his mouth shut and focuses on his performance.

Even with Richie gone, he still has a wonderful friend group to lean on. They still meet up for movie nights, breakfast at cheap diners, and tonight, they plan a bowling excursion.

Mike is a fucking master at bowling. He swears up and down he only bowls on occasion, but he exchanges a little look with the manager that definitely implies otherwise. He's beating them all by far, but Eddie is the one with the lowest score. He can outrun a mountain lion, maybe, but he cannot hit any pins without bumpers.

"Holy shit, Eddie. You suck," Stan claps him on the shoulder as he once again hits no pins on his turn.

"Well, we can't all be bowling prodigies like Walter Ray Williams over here," Eddie motions towards Mike as he takes his turn, hitting a strike flawlessly.

"Who the hell is that?" Bev arches an eyebrow at Eddie. Ben beats him to it.

“He’s a Pro Bowler,” He answers.

“That’s a thing?” Stan gives Ben a look of disbelief.

Mike ignores the conversation at hand, “The only person who can beat me is Richie, and he’s not here so I’m going to smoke all you suckers,” He tosses a smirk over his shoulder as he moves out of the way to let Bev take her turn.

“Richie’s good at bowling? Seriously? That seven-foot-tall clumsy beanpole is good at something that requires a semblance of coordination?” Eddie snorts, trying to picture Richie making a strike as effortlessly as Mike does. He can’t.

“He’s actually fantastic,” Bill pipes up from where he and Audra are hogging the pizza they ordered, “Freshman year we decided to go out for a bowling night and even he was surprised at how good he was. They even have a picture of him over there,” Eddie turns around to see where Bill is pointing, and sure enough, there’s a picture of Richie with a cheesy grin that looks like it was taken on Kindergarten class picture day. It has a tiny little gold plaque under it that says ‘1995 Bowling Champion’.

“He says that he won some competition and they framed a picture of him for that. I think that’s bullshit. I’m a hundred percent certain that he put that picture up there himself and no one questioned it,” Stan says, giving an annoyed look at the picture on the wall. Eddie grins back at the picture and his heart gives a little squeeze. God, he misses him.

“That should be me,” Mike grumbles while smiling.

“I miss that sucker,” Bev announces to the room, head on Ben’s shoulder, “It’s so quiet without him. If he was here we would’ve been kicked out by now.”

Eddie can tell she misses Richie just as much as he does. They all do. Even Bev and Ben, who have only known him for a few weeks. That’s how charming Richie is- he wins people’s hearts in a matter of days.

“I hope he comes back before Georgie visits for Thanksgiving next

week,” Bill takes his turn, knocking over a measly three pins. It’s better than anything Eddie has done so far, “Georgie always manages to cheer him up. Remember David?” He asks Stan, whose face turns sour.

“I remember that prick,” Is all he says.

“David?” Eddie asks. Even though they’ve been friends for a few months now, it still feels like there’s so much he needs to catch up on. They’ve all been friends for *years*, aside from Bev and Ben. And even then, those two just celebrated their four year anniversary. There’s a lot that he’s missed out on.

“An ex-boyfriend of Richie’s. It’s a long story, but he broke Richie’s heart. I couldn’t get him out of bed until Georgie visited and the two of them played video games for two days straight. He felt a lot better after that.”

Eddie didn’t know about Richie’s ex, but that isn’t a big deal. They usually don’t talk about things like that, opting to theorize about aliens and Bigfoot like a couple of high tenth graders. Richie chickens out of any conversations deeper than that, usually.

He just hopes that Richie comes back in time to hang out with Georgie, to take his mind off of the death of his mother. He can’t imagine what he’s going through, surrounded by mourning family members and memories of his mother.

“So you’re staying here for Thanksgiving?” He asks, and Bill confirms with a nod.

“All of us except Stan do, he’s a momma’s boy,” Stan sticks his tongue out at him.

“I’m staying this year, remember?” Stan reminds him.

“Oh shit, yeah. Thank god, you’re the best cook out of all of us,” Stan beams with pride as Bill redirects his attention to Bev and Ben, “What about you guys? We’re having a little Thanksgiving celebration at my apartment. You’re invited if you aren’t going home. You too, Eddie.”

“Ben is going back home, but I’d love to go,” Bev smiles, “His sweet

potato pie is amazing and he's keeping it all to himself and his family this year."

"I told you, I'll make you one when I get home," Ben squeezes her shoulder, "And I'll make one for all of you guys, too."

"It's not the same," Bev complains.

Eddie contemplates his choices. He'd been planning on visiting his mother but procrastinated on buying a ticket because, well, he *really* doesn't want to go home. If he's willing to put up with her scolding him on the phone for thirty minutes, she might finally relent and accept that he's spending Thanksgiving with his friends. *Maybe she'll even be happy for me*, he thinks, but pushes that thought away as quickly as it came. The only times she's ever been genuinely happy is anytime he's been ill- *truly* ill, with the flu or even a measly cold. He shudders at the thought of her crooning over him.

"I'll go," He says finally. Bev and Stan cheer and he blushes at their enthusiasm.

Georgie is a sweet sixteen-year-old with sweeping dirty blonde hair and a bright, dimpled smile. He's dressed in a ringer tee and pair of acid wash jeans and he putters around the apartment like he's lived there his whole life.

He's quite a chatterbox, actually. He talks about his friends and tells lots of embarrassing stories about Bill from his childhood. He brought lots of drawings for Richie to see- apparently, Richie's the number one fan of his art and likes to hang it on his walls. All this time, Eddie had assumed Richie had drawn them himself. They were impressive drawings, ranging from characters on TV shows to pictures of animals and buildings. It seemed like the ones Richie appreciated the most were Georgie's original characters doing goofy things, making pancakes or rollerskating.

When Bill breaks the news that Richie won't be coming, Georgie is sorely disappointed. However, when they explain why Richie isn't in town, he immediately starts drawing some comics to cheer him up

when he *does* come back.

It's sooner than they all think.

Eddie is stressing in the kitchen with Stan, both of them squabbling with each other over sweet potatoes and turkey. Something is burning, he can smell it, but he's busy with the *fucking* fruit salad, *Stan*. Stan washes his hands religiously, as does Eddie, so at the very least they know the food will be sanitary. The only problem is, there's a constant argument over who gets to use the sink and who's taking too long.

Bill and Georgie are spending some one-on-one brother time, i.e. a good game of Candyland during which they argue like morons. Mike and Bev and Audra are all drinking beers and watching re-runs of *Friends*, shouting about which character they relate to the most.

Eddie's heart feels full. He feels so much happier than he ever has on a holiday. Holidays back home were full of scolding, tense conversations, shitty presents, and undercooked food. Even with Stan shouting at him for hogging the cutting board and all of his friends screaming from various parts of the house, he's over the moon. He loves his friends so much.

Just as they're setting all the bowls of cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes out on the counter, the front door swings open. From his spot near the dining table, Eddie can just barely see who's entered the house around the curve of the wall, but he'd recognize the corner of that ugly tie-dye sweater anywhere.

"Richie!" He shouts at the top of his lungs, hastily setting down the sauce to run to the door. Richie automatically opens his arms wide so Eddie can wrap around his middle. As the others run over to join them, Richie pushes his hands into Eddie's hair and the realization of just how much he missed this tall, sweet idiot hits him all at once.

"You're home!" Bill's arms come down around them and *squeeze*. Stan's bitching about the food getting cold but he joins the group hug anyway, and soon everyone else is there, too.

"Why'd you come home early?" Mike asks, "I thought you were

staying until December?”

“I just couldn’t take it anymore,” Richie says, distractedly running his hand up and down Eddie’s arm, “My dad wouldn’t stop making shitty comments about her and it was so hard, being up there and seeing all my family members and old high school bullies. I had to get out before I exploded.”

He seems to notice Georgie to his left just then, squealing his name and pulling him in for a hug of their own. Stan announces a bit more loudly than that dinner is going to be cold if they don’t get their asses to the table.

They gather around the large dining table and spoon out the dishes while bickering with one another. Georgie and Richie chatter happily about some high school event Georgie attended at the beginning of his Junior year. Eddie suddenly realizes all at once why Richie loves Georgie so much- they’re both so enthusiastic about everything, so kind and outgoing. Georgie is almost like a little Richie, albeit a bit less obnoxious and nowhere near as crude.

“So, tell me what’s happened since I’ve been gone,” Richie implores, digging into his food. Instantaneously, he groans, “Who cooked the food? Holy shit this is good.”

“Eddie and Stan did all the cooking, we were totally useless,” Mike answers.

Richie rubs a gentle hand down his back, “I knew Stan was a good cook, but you?”

Eddie grins proudly and thanks him before taste-testing the cranberry sauce he’d made. There are bowls being passed over heads and screams of laughter resounding throughout the house and Eddie feels so fucking happy. As he pushes around the last few pieces of food on his plate, he watches Richie talk with Mike about their physics class loudly, giggling about their dickish professor. He looks so *happy*, Eddie can hardly believe that he’s just returned from mourning his mother. He’s not sure if that’s how most people deal with grief, or if Richie’s the exception. Richie is such a joyous, positive person, it would only make sense for him to deal with grief by cracking jokes

and spending time with friends and trying to be *happy*.

“Okay, okay, let’s go around the table and say what we’re grateful for,” Bill says, cutting off all of the ongoing conversations.

“Oh! Me first!” Bev squeals excitedly, “First of all, I’m thankful for Ben- Can you tell him I said that so he knows I’m the best girlfriend ever? And second of all, I’m thankful for this *amazing* food! Stan, Eddie, you really outdid yourselves,” Both Eddie and Stan smile bashfully.

They try to go in order around the table, but it doesn’t exactly work like that with everyone interrupting each other and splitting off into side conversations. Audra sweetly says she’s thankful for Bill and his welcoming friends, and Bill returns the sentiment. Georgie says he’s thankful for his cool big brother, Stan says he’s thankful he didn’t have to go home for Thanksgiving this year and put up with his drunk Uncle Steve, Mike says he’s thankful for his found family. Eddie’s voice gets a bit stuck in his throat when he thanks them all for inviting him and explains that holidays weren’t always a happy occasion growing up. He tells them he’s thankful for the love they’ve given him in just a few short months.

And then it’s Richie’s turn, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s staring at Eddie with squinted eyes like he’s smiling without moving his mouth. Eddie flushes and nudges him to get him to take his turn.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Richie starts, not moving his gaze away from Eddie for a few solid moments. He turns to look around the table, “I’m thankful for all of you morons. Bill, you were my roommate Freshman year and thank *god* for that, because who knows where I’d be without you. Mike, Stan, you guys are my fucking rocks, you’ve been there for me through everything. Georgie, little man, you are the little brother I never had,” He pulls Georgie into his right side with a little hug, “And our newer additions, Bev and Eddie- and Ben, but he ditched us. You little suckers, handpicked personally by me-”

“Actually, I was Eddie’s friend first,” Stan interrupts.

“No, no, no, Stan the Man. He punched me in the face and cursed me out two years before you were ever friends with him, remember?”

When Stan rolls his eyes instead of attempting to argue, Richie continues, “Bev and Eddie, you two little suckers are going to be part of our group for the rest of our lives, I just know it. I love you guys, all of you. I’m so happy to be here, right now, instead of back home,” His hand is on Eddie’s back, fingers grazing just under the hair on his neck, making Eddie shiver. Eddie reaches out, pulls him in for a side-hug and whispers a ‘thank you’ into his ear. With a twinkle in his eye, Richie jerks his head in his direction and winks.

They sit on the couch for quite some time after dinner while reruns of late-night comedies play in the background. Nobody really pays attention to the TV, though, unless it’s to make a joke or branch off into a different conversation. Mike sits in the armchair, not talking all that much, merely observing everyone else as they chat. Bill and Audra lay on the living room floor side by side with a bowl of popcorn between them. How they can even stand to eat anymore is beyond Eddie, who’s wedged between Stan and Richie on the couch feeling like he’s about to pop. Bev has somehow managed to fall asleep on Richie’s shoulder, and Georgie is propped up against the couch, head lolled over on Richie’s (airport-germ-covered, smelly) feet as he snores loudly.

Richie is pressed up against Eddie’s side, so warm and comforting and peaceful. But... he’s so *quiet*. Eddie supposes it could be exhaustion from jetlag and the heavy weight of lethargy that comes along with a full stomach. This feels somehow different, though. It doesn’t seem like it would be wise to ask about it, so he just pushes closer to Richie and puts his head onto his unoccupied shoulder just to remind him he’s there.

About twenty minutes later, Richie gets up to use the restroom, disturbing both Eddie and Bev in the process. Bev scoots over and uses Eddie as her new pillow, smelling like cigarettes and something else sweeter.

“How’s Ben doing back home?” He whispers, feeling the need to stay quiet. Bev and Georgie hadn’t been the only ones to fall asleep. Stan is curled against the arm of the couch like a cat and Audra is napping on Bill’s chest peacefully.

“He missed his mom a lot, so he’s pretty happy,” She pokes her toes at Eddie’s socked foot.

“You two grew up in the same hometown, right? Why don’t you ever go back with him?”

Bev inhales deeply, blows out the air like the smoke of a cigarette, “My dad was... not good. Really, really bad actually. And my mom died so,” She shrugs, “I would love to be with him on the holidays but it’s not worth sacrificing my sanity. We’re spending Christmas together this year,” Eddie can’t see her face from where it’s resting on his shoulder, but he knows she’s smiling just from thinking about Christmas with Ben.

“You two are really lucky to have each other,” Eddie tells her, pressing his cheek firmly against the top of her head, “And we’re all really lucky to have both of you.”

Bev turns her head and angles it so that she can press a chaste kiss to his cheek. She wraps her fingers around his forearm, “You should go check on him, he’s been gone a while.”

He glances at the big, gold clock on the wall above Mike’s head and realizes it’s been about thirty minutes since Richie left, “He’s probably just napping,” He answers with a shrug.

“Eddie, go check on him,” She repeats. There’s something in her voice that tells him he shouldn’t argue with her.

She pulls back from him, scooting closer to Stan this time to use as a pillow. Eddie rolls his eyes, wishing he could take a picture of all his sleepy friends piled into one living room.

He turns away and wanders down the hall, finding the bathroom empty and Richie’s bedroom door closed.

Taking a deep breath, he knocks on the door gently. There’s the sound of shuffling inside.

“Yeah?” Richie’s voice sounds rough and low from the other side of the door.

“Hey, Rich. Would you- Could I come in?” He’s surprised when there’s no immediate answer- yes or no. It’s very unlike Richie to shut anyone out or hesitate at all, “It’s okay if you want to be alone. I know you went through a lot these past few weeks. I just didn’t want you to be alone if you... didn’t *want* to be alone,” He winces at how nonsensical his words are and hopes that Richie just knows what he means. That he doesn’t have to be alone. That Eddie loves and cares about him so much and wishes so badly that he could take away the pain he’s enduring.

“You can come in, Eds.”

Eddie pushes the door open to the sight of Richie curled up on the bed, over the covers with bloodshot eyes and black hair that’s grown almost to his shoulders all splayed out on the pillow under him. It’s a heart-wrenching thing to look at, even as Richie uses his sleeve to wipe at his nose. Eddie’s reminded of when he broke up with Matt and Richie was there with ice cream and tissues and boxing gloves and he wants nothing more than to be that supportive for Richie.

“One second,” He says, holding up a finger and smiling to himself when Richie pouts dramatically as he leaves the room. He returns with a roll of toilet paper from the hall closet, entering the room and shutting the door behind him.

“I don’t think Bill has any ice cream in the freezer, and I know for a fact that you guys don’t have any tissues here, so accept my humble offering of a roll of toilet paper,” He sets it on the nightstand next to Richie’s head, then sits in the space on the side of the bed, lower back pressed against Richie’s side.

“Thank you,” Richie looks so small laying under Eddie like this, lips curled into a watery smile, “It’s like when I got that phone call a faucet opened and I can’t figure out how to turn it off,” As if to punctuate his point his eyes well up with fresh tears and *fuck*, Eddie really hates seeing him like this. He wants the old Richie back- the funny, happy, loud Richie. He supposes Richie feels the same way.

“Move over,” He requests. Richie follows his command instantaneously, making grabby hands for Eddie as soon as he’s settled on the other side of the bed. Eddie, of course, complies. He

adjusts himself until he's laying on his side, about a foot away from Richie. That foot still feels like too much space, and his heart throbs at the thought. *Now isn't the time*, he reprimands his heart, willing it to settle in his chest.

"Spaghetti," Richie whispers. Eddie stops himself from snapping at the nickname when he sees the look in Richie's eyes. His glasses are crooked on his face but they still magnify the tears and hurt and wet, sticking eyelashes. His eyebrows draw together and he exhales shakily, "It hurts so fucking much."

Much to Eddie's dismay, choked sobs make their way out of Richie's throat as he squeezes his eyes shut. Richie makes no move to touch him, and that hurts more than seeing him cry. Richie is crude and loud and ridiculous, but above all of that, he's affectionate. He hugs and kisses and cuddles and for some reason, he's holding back when he needs it the most.

But when Eddie reaches out to hold onto him, it's like the dam breaks.

Eddie loops one arm over Richie's shoulder and tries to wriggle the other one under the space between the mattress and his other shoulder. Richie lifts up, giving him enough room to get by, and lunges forward to wrap his own arms around Eddie. His face buries into Eddie's neck and he cries like he did when he first heard the news over the phone. Eddie just pets at his hair, runs his fingers over every knob of his spine and space between his ribs. It's *almost* like how they hugged on the floor under the kitchen phone, but it's different. It's more tender, more loving. Eddie's head doesn't feel like it's spinning, he doesn't feel like he's outside of his own body. In fact, he can feel every little piece of his body, and all of it is on fire. It's on fire with the anger he feels at the world for making someone as beautiful and kind as Richie go through something as fucking terrible as this.

But he can't do anything to fix it other than be there for him, so he is.

"I hadn't talked to her for three months, Eds. *Three months*. All because I was fucking *mad* at her. She loved me, I should've talked to

her. I should've just told her that I wanted her to stop calling to ask for money or to complain about my dad. I should've told her that I wanted to have a better relationship with her, but instead I just pushed her out," He sniffles against Eddie's shoulder and it's a sound that breaks Eddie's heart just a little more.

"Richie," Eddie soothes, clumsy hands still twisting through his hair, "You didn't do anything wrong. She pushed *you* away, and you loved her anyway."

Richie presses his wet face further into the bare skin just above Eddie's collarbone and he tries not to think of how Richie's essentially using him as a human tissue. Richie's thumb is sliding over one spot just below his shoulder blade over and over, and Eddie focuses on that feeling instead. He closes his eyes, hooks his chin over Richie's shoulder, and breathes in the scent of him. If anyone had told him in August that he'd find himself hugging a crying Richie Tozier in bed by Thanksgiving he'd have thought they were crazy.

"See? I told you, I'm like a fucking faucet. All snot and tears and mucus," Eddie laughs as much as he's able without his voice cracking and pulls back to look at him.

"Your glasses are all dirty," He says, tugging them off and rubbing the grime off with the bottom of his sweater. Richie watches him closely, making Eddie's stomach do flips. He can't place the odd look on Richie's face, the way he's staring at him with wide eyes and parted lips. His gut squirms uncomfortably at the thought that perhaps the moment had been too intimate, that clinging to your best friend as they cry into your shoulder is a step too far.

"Thank you," Richie whispers, taking the frames from Eddie and returning them to his face. Timidly, Eddie rolls onto his back to give Richie some space, laughing when he clings onto Eddie's sleeve to keep him from going too far.

Richie doesn't laugh, only smiles sadly and rests his hand on Eddie's bicep, closing his eyes, "Stay?" He requests tenderly.

And Eddie isn't sure exactly what he means, how long he wants Eddie to lay there with him. But he knows this: he would stay with Richie

as long as he asked, he would do anything for him if he smiled the way he is now. He would lay there for years, with Richie's hand on his arm, and Richie's breath flowing across the side of his face, and Richie's smell overwhelming all of his other senses. He would leave, too, if that's what Richie wanted. He would do anything.

Because he loves him, more than he thinks he's ever loved anything before.

Eddie realizes as he watches Richie fall into a peaceful sleep just as the clock strikes midnight that he's always been afraid of love. But this love, it scares him in a different way than love ever has. Love has always been angry and scary and daunting and controlling. Love has, however, never been this gentle and this all-consuming. Eddie is afraid of the things he'd do if Richie asked. He's afraid of how willingly he'd break himself to make Richie whole.

Given Eddie's track record, between his mother and Matt, there's no telling if he's made the right choice in loaning his heart out to Richie—someone who doesn't even know he has it.

He just has to hope that Richie's hands won't tear it in two.

Life continues that way for a while: Richie seems happy most of the time but quietly grieves in privacy. Sometimes he talks to Eddie about it, sometimes he pushes him away. The days he pushes Eddie away are the especially bad ones. One thing Eddie knows about Richie is that he is almost never too upset to reject the presence of people. He's an extrovert, an entertainer, he finds comfort in other people's chatter and touch. Eddie knows things are particularly grim on the days Richie locks himself in his room and quietly requests that Eddie leave him alone. Those are the days that Eddie will slip a little joke under the door on a notecard. Sometimes he'll amble around the apartment with Bill, cooking anything he thinks Richie might like, cooking more than he ever has before. It's a good opportunity to try new dishes, and Bill is very appreciative of some real food in the apartment that isn't a microwaveable meal or hamburger helper.

He spends more time there than he does in his dorm. Bill starts to

throw hints about wanting to move into Audra's apartment and Richie needing a new roommate. He knows that Bill's hoping Eddie will want to move in. His housing contract at the school goes by semester, so in theory, he could. But, it would require a lot of paperwork and effort and Richie hasn't said anything about wanting him to move in so he thinks it's probably better if he doesn't.

He practically lives there, anyway. He keeps a spare toothbrush in the bathroom and he has several pairs of pajamas and day clothes in Richie's dresser just in case he happens to stay the night, which he often does. And when he does, he sleeps in Richie's bed. It's all starting to feel a bit intense.

He sees the looks his friends give him. He *knows* they know, he's just grateful none of them have said anything. He doesn't think that Richie is in a good state of mind to deal with relationship drama. And sure, part of him also doesn't want to admit it because he's scared. He's scared because his feelings for Matt were microscopic in comparison to the ocean of emotions he feels just at the simple act of Richie entering a room. He's scared because he *loves* Richie, and that does not hinge on getting to kiss him. If he could just *be* with Richie, for the rest of his life- just talk and laugh with him forever- it would be more than enough.

But being in love with someone who could potentially not love him back means that, when the truth comes to light, their friendship could crumble down around them.

And then he'd get nothing- no laughs, no late midnight talks, no video game sessions, no trips to *The Super Dragon*.

Sure, Richie could love him back, but is it something Eddie's willing to gamble?

Even if he did love him back, there's something else hanging over him. Something as hidden in the dark as his fear of being unloveable. Is he even capable of loving Richie the way he deserves?

Richie lights up a room the moment he enters it with laughter and incessant jokes and warmth. He loves dearly and fiercely, always spends time trying to cheer others up, and worries over Georgie like

he's paid to. He's practically the *embodiment* of love and warmth, even when he's been at a low these past few weeks.

And Eddie is... what? Angry, bossy, and borderline mean? Forgetful, self-centered, cowardly?

Is that *really* what Richie deserves?

It doesn't come from a place of self-pity in the slightest. That's a separate issue altogether. It's just that, when Eddie thinks of Richie with someone, it's never him. It's someone as affectionate and happy and bright as he is.

Sure, he's not *completely* blinded by love, he knows Richie has his flaws, too. He knows Richie is irritating, he takes jokes too far, he brags a bit too much, and desperately skirts around talking about anything too serious. But, he still deserves to be loved properly.

And that's just something Eddie cannot offer.

"Your hair is so curly, Eddie," Bev hums as she twists her fingers through the limp ringlets in her lap, "Well, it's not as curly as Richie's but... *wow*, it's a lot curlier than I thought it would be."

Eddie relaxes further into her thighs, always a sucker for having his hair played with. It's quite long now- nothing compared to Richie's shoulder-length hair Eddie has been begging him to cut (but secretly loves). His own hair hangs in choppy little waves around his face and suits him much better than the length his mother always insisted he keep it at. It's soft and 'compliments his cheekbones', as Richie always says.

They're on the couch in Bev and Ben's shared apartment, which is much closer to the school than Richie's. Ben had to work a night shift, so Eddie was his gay replacement who would watch movies with Bev without hitting on her.

"Why do you keep your hair so short, Bev?" He asks. The question isn't meant to offend. He is personally a big fan of her short hair, but it's not a very common occurrence for women to keep their hair in a

bob like hers. He reaches a hand up to play with it, where the ends fall just above the corner of her jaw. They've grown very close since meeting at *The Super Dragon*. Richie constantly claims that he's a platonic cupid since he was technically the one to 'introduce' them.

Bev laughs to herself. Eddie blinks at the noise, it sounds strangely sad. He leans his head back further, pointing his chin up to get a better look at her face, "It was some overdramatic teenage moment," She sighs. Her face darkens and she stills her movements in Eddie's hair, "Well I guess it wasn't *overdramatic*. More just... dramatic. My dad would- He... It was-"

Eddie places the palm in her hair onto her cheek, ending her rambling, "You don't have to explain."

She leans into it, her throat clicking as she swallows, "It was horrible, all of it," Her voice is barely a whisper as she talks, "I still forget that I can trust people. That not everyone is like him."

The silence after is nearly deafening. It dawns on him that he and Bev aren't all that different. Maybe the little details aren't the same, but they both came from rough childhoods with dangerous parents and a toxic example of love. They both moved away from it, tried to build a new life, and mostly succeeded. But, Eddie went to a therapist for a few months Freshman year and she told him that he would never fully outrun it, that he'd be in a constant war with himself. And sure, that's true in some ways. He constantly doubts others motives and is terrified of people perceiving him as weak or fragile. He washes his hands once every hour, he can't share straws or utensils, he has to be at least five feet away from a microwave when it's on, and he can't even *think* about sex without wanting to do an internet search on statistics about STDs (except for that one brief moment with Matt, and that didn't end well).

But he thinks that sometimes, when he's with the people he *knows* he can trust- the people who love him- maybe he can outrun that war for just a little while. It's the night in between battles, the Christmas Truce of 1914, where he lays his head in Bev's lap or falls asleep in Richie's bed or dozes off on Stan's shoulder. He gets to lay down his weapons, store away his fight or flight mode, and just rest.

"I love you," He says, voice cracking at the end. It's then that he realizes how consumed by emotion he is. He loves Bev so much, he loves that he can trust her, he loves that she loves him enough to invite him over for one-on-one time like they're *best friends* or something which is *insane* to Eddie that he'd be even considered the best friend of someone as cool as Bev.

He just *really* fucking loves her. And maybe it's a little selfish to love her for those reasons, but it's the truth.

A thumb brushes over his forehead, "I love you too, Eddie."

Change has never been easy for Eddie. When he was a kid his mother had the perfect routine set up for him. Every day was exactly the same, no exceptions.

Changing is difficult. Sometimes he can force himself outside of his comfort zone to get some tattoos or flirt with cute guys but it takes so much effort to get to that point that by the end of it all he's exhausted. Making friends, going to new restaurants, and shaking up his daily routine are all experiences that make Eddie want to tear his hair out.

His friends make change easier. It turns out, changing isn't so hard when there are people there to do it with you with blatant enthusiasm about the excitement of change. Change is exciting for other people, Eddie's learned, and when Stan is in his face prattling on about the new diner he just ate at it's a lot less tempting to search up their health code examinations. Instead, he'll go to the diner, try not to eye the dirt piling up in the nooks and crannies of the restaurant, and he'll enjoy a meal with his best friend.

Maybe that's why, when Richie is cooking a meal for himself in the kitchen for the first time in *weeks* and rambling on about how *fun* it would be if Eddie were to move in with him, he goes straight to the administration and starts the process of the mountain of paperwork required for him to move out for the second semester. And when he tells Richie, he lifts Eddie off of the ground and spins him around like he's a ragdoll.

He feels breathless and boundless, like his mother couldn't touch him or control him ever again. She can't stop him from making decisions that make him happy anymore. He's in charge of his own life, now.

Then Christmas rolls around the corner before Eddie even knows what's happening and his mom had purchased him a plane ticket all the way back in July so there was no way he could squirm out of her reach.

This time, though, he is *not* going to let her beat him down. It's not going to happen. He tells this to Richie as he hugs him goodbye, that he feels stronger and like he's his own person now, and he won't let her make him feel small again.

It's easier said than done. The second she wraps him up in her arms when she picks him up at the airport he feels twelve years old again. There was always something so safe yet so confining about her presence. He feels it now, sitting in the kitchen with her on Christmas Eve as she prepares food for tomorrow. There's this tightness in his chest that he hasn't felt since he realized the 'asthma' was all a lie and that it was all in his head. 'All in his head' made it sound so much easier, like it was all a myth, but he still felt it. It had crossed his mind before that maybe it was the result of anxiety, the severe kind that bordered on a disorder. He always pushes that thinking away as soon as it comes because if he really does have a *diagnosable* disorder he's terrified of what his mind might do with that information. He won't be able to stop thinking about it, he'll tear his mind apart and then he'll use it as an excuse to wrap himself up in bubble wrap.

He doesn't want to be fragile, but maybe he is.

"Eddiebear? You're awfully quiet, are you feeling well?" Sonia asks in the sickly-sweet voice she always uses when she's hoping Eddie is sick.

Eddie stirs from his seat at the kitchen table where he'd been existing in a trance until she finally spoke up. He had tried to help with cooking, but she wouldn't let him- too many knives and hot surfaces.

"I'm fine, Ma, just tired from the flight," He says, which isn't entirely

a lie. He *is* tired from the flight. It was quick but early in the morning and his brain is so rattled he can't even relax enough to sleep at this point. His brain sounds like radio static every time his mother speaks to him and he's programmed to just say 'Yes, Ma' and 'No, Ma' and 'I'm fine, Ma'. He understands now why Bev hated going home for the holidays.

"How's school going?" She asks as she slices an onion. Eddie thinks about Thanksgiving day when Stan was fighting with him over the cutting board and smiles.

"It's good, I made some friends and they-

"How are your grades?" She interrupts and just like that, Eddie shuts down. It's startling, how easy it is to lose himself once he comes back home. A few hours with his mom and it's like he's going backwards in time, losing everything he worked so hard for, every bit of his *real* self in exchange for the docile, loving son she groomed him to be.

It doesn't take long for him to feel like he's cracking under pressure.

"Merry Christmas, Eds!" Richie shouts over the phone, *"Bev's here, too. Let me get her, hold on."*

Eddie listens to the sound of rustling on the other side of the phone from the warmth of his childhood bed. After exchanging a few presents that day Eddie had retreated to the safety of this room just to avoid exploding when his mother asked if he was 'feeling alright' for about the thirtieth time that morning. All of his Aunts and Uncles and Cousins were going to be coming over for dinner and would certainly join in on the fawning and the nagging questions and the constant hints at him getting a girlfriend. He was one breath away from needing an inhaler he didn't even have anymore before he decided to call Richie.

"Eddie, there's a madman screaming Mariah Carey Christmas tunes in my ear. You know him better than anyone, is there an off button? You've got to help me!"

The weight on his chest lessens a little more as he grins into the phone, "Merry Christmas, Bev. Sorry you're spending it with Richie."

"Don't worry about me, Ben is here, too. We're taking turns babysitting him," Eddie hears Ben shout 'Merry Christmas!' in the background of the call. He imagines them wearing little Santa hats and drinking the peppermint vodka Richie had purchased to make 'Candy Cane Martinis'. Oh, how he wishes he was there instead of his mother's house that smells like mothballs.

"I miss you guys," He admits quietly, embarrassed at the burning of tears at the back of his eyes. He turns into such a wuss around his mother.

"We miss you too, Eddie. How are things going for you?" Bev surely caught onto the tone of his voice, judging by the way she asks that question. Eddie looks towards the closed door, as though he'll be able to look through it and ensure his mother isn't within earshot.

"Not good at all," He whispers, "I hate it here."

Bev sighs and sniffs, lowering her volume also, *"You're tough, you're going to get through this just fine. You're stronger than me, that's for sure."*

Eddie shakes his head rapidly, sadly, "No one is as strong as you, Bev."

"Just wait until you see what I got you for Christmas," She changes the direction of the conversation suddenly. Eddie doesn't question why, he knows that her history is uncharted territory, something she doesn't speak about often or for long, *"I'm going to give you back to Richie now."*

Before he can say anything back, Richie's voice is booming in his ears, *"Didja get anything good this morning? Ben gave me this sick pair of tie-dye pajama pants."*

"God, don't you have enough tie-dye shit already?"

"Nope, I'm still waiting on that tie-dye suit you promised me for Christmas," Richie chuckles.

"I didn't promise you shit," Eddie smiles when Richie laughs a little louder this time, "It's so awful here. I shouldn't have gone."

“Hey, where’s that little firecracker that told me he wasn’t going to let his mom walk all over him this time?” Fuck, Eddie loves the sound of his voice. He closes his eyes against it, the familiarity and warmth.

“She just... strangles the life out of me. I don’t feel like I’m my own person here. She erases all of that until I’m just... nothing. She has no idea who I really am, it’s like she doesn’t even *see* me,” He sniffs, swallowing the lump in his throat, “Sorry, this is heavy shit for Christmas morning.”

Richie ignores the latter comment, “*I see you, Eds, and I can’t wait to really see you when you come home. It’s only two more days, okay? I’ll even pick you up from the airport if you want me to,*” Eddie doesn’t even have to be there to see the smile on his face.

“I was just going to take a taxi home but sure, bring that ugly, rusty deathtrap to the airport and pick me up,” He giggles at the thought of Richie’s rusty orange truck surrounded by all the taxis and black limousines.

“Can’t wait,” Richie says sweetly, “Love ya, Spaghetti.”

“Love you too, Shithead,” Eddie grins, closing his eyes as the call ends.

The days go by easily, he gets home and Richie nearly kills him with how tightly he hugs him. They host their own little Christmas party with all of the losers, exchanging presents and drinking Candy Cane Martinis that Richie swears are the best thing he’s ever made (spoiler: they’re awful).

Before he knows it, it’s time to move all of his stuff out of his dorm and into Richie’s apartment. He panics for about three seconds (about making a change this big, about how *gross* the apartment is, about how he’s going to be fucking *living* with someone he has a *huge* crush on) but then Richie is there, throwing shit carelessly into boxes but making Eddie laugh all along the way, and suddenly he’s not so worried. Because even though he loves him in a way that makes his heart beat out of his chest and his stomach twist into knots, he also

loves him in a way that makes his brain stop working overtime and his stomach hurt from how much he's laughing. Richie is his best friend first and foremost, and everything else comes after.

All of his friends are sitting in his room using various boxes as furniture, passing a massive bowl of popcorn all around the room, and it suddenly occurs to Eddie that he's home. He's home and he's made this home all by himself. He's worked hard for every piece of it. It's *his*, these people are *his*, and he's never going to forget this. Even if they don't always stay in touch, even if they move across the country or globe, he's always going to remember that these people right here are *his*, and he is theirs.

Moving in is the best decision he's ever made. When he tells his mom about this life change, she talks his ear off in a frenzied panic about the dangers of living on his own without campus administration around and how he doesn't even really *know* Richie- but Richie is in the same room as him playing video games and groaning loudly every time he dies and Eddie can hardly hear her over the sound of his own laughter.

It's going fairly smoothly, with Eddie sleeping in Bill's old room (though he misses having to sleep in Richie's when he was just a house guest) and having to clean up after Richie *constantly* (though he *is* getting better and cleaning up after himself at Eddie's insistence). There's nothing he can complain about, really. They end almost every night with some Chinese takeout (on the nights that Bev comes over to hand-deliver it to them) or some Hamburger Helper and a board game that usually calls for more than two players but they always make it work. And they touch, *a lot*. It's fine, though. It feels normal. Right. Like something they were made to do. They're affectionate friends, it's no different than it is with Stan or Bev or any of the others. And if it is, Eddie's not complaining.

They're happy. They drive each other crazy, but they're happy. Eddie is always putting away stuff that Richie wasn't done using, and Richie is always playing music too loud. Eddie showers way too long for Richie's liking, and Richie is prone to inconvenient acts of mischief, like this...

“Edward, my love, get the fuck up,” Richie says, sounding like a mosquito buzzing in his ear. It’s early in the morning and he’s in Eddie’s room for some reason. Eddie swats at him, landing a good smack on his nose that causes Richie to yelp in surprise.

“Why are you waking me up? I’m tired, you asshole,” He opens one eye, finding Richie startlingly close. He expects him to be grinning like a madman, like he usually is when he does things like this, but he’s just watching Eddie with a fond smile.

“I wanted to show you something, crankypants,” He sticks his tongue out, wiggles it, then tugs on Eddie’s arm, “I promise you I’ll buy you dinner at *The Super Dragon* if you do this.”

“That’s your favorite restaurant, not mine, remember?” Eddie groans, opening the other eye sleepily. The room is still pretty dark, meaning the sun is not out yet. Why on earth is Richie up so early?

“Oh, come on, you love it too. You just don’t want to admit it because of ‘safety codes’,” Richie rolls his eyes as he does air quotes, “Come on, please.”

The dramatic pout on his face is cute enough to make Eddie submit, rolling up and out of bed, “Let me brush my teeth first.”

“You’re going to want to bundle up, too,” Richie grins.

“We’re going *outside*?” Eddie groans loudly, but Richie just smiles triumphantly.

Richie brings two lawn chairs with him and leads him towards the stairs in their building.

“Can’t we just take the fucking elevator?” Eddie whines, but follows Richie anyway. He seems pretty excited and it’s too sweet for Eddie to really be mad about anything. He follows him up four flights of stairs to the top of the building, and he realizes then that Richie wants to watch the sunrise with him.

“Are we allowed to be up here?” He asks as the chilly air hits them,

gusting over the empty, dusty rooftop.

"I've never gotten in trouble," Richie answers with a shrug, walking to the edge of the rooftop, next to the little wall that prevents him from hurtling off.

"It's fucking freezing, you jackass," Eddie complains, pulling the coat he's wearing closer to himself.

But it's beautiful, he realizes as he catches his breath. The sun is barely peeking out over the horizon, only a small ring of orange surrounding it. The rest of the sky is still a grey-yellow, like the yolk of an egg. The lights of the city twinkle below them- a whole population getting ready for the day. And despite the beginnings of traffic below, nothing seems to make a sound. It's like the whole world has gone quiet for the two of them.

When he tears his eyes away from the beauty surrounding them on the rooftop, he finds Richie kicking open the lawn chairs he brought with him. He shoves the blue one towards Eddie.

"For you, m'lady," He bows as Eddie rolls his eyes and takes a seat. Richie makes quick work of the other chair and presses it as close to Eddie as he can get.

"This is beautiful, Richie," Eddie says as the sky heats up, orange blossoming into red and pink. Richie's arm, wrapped in his favorite dark green sweater, presses against his on the overlapping arms of the chair, "How often do you come out here?"

Richie pushes his head towards Eddie, giving him a mouthful of curls as he lays down on his shoulder. A heavy sigh fills the air, Eddie watches as headlights turn off with the rising sun.

"A lot," Richie answers, "I've been having a hard time sleeping lately and... it's so nice. I was coming up here to smoke cigarettes at first but- I guess my moms smoking habit was what attributed to her stroke," A hum from his throat vibrates on Eddie's shoulder. It's a habit Richie has, a way of clearing the tightness of tears so he doesn't reveal that he's moments away from crying, "So I'm trying to quit. Now, when I come up here I just... watch. I pick a person on the

street and make up a story about them, or I just watch the sunrise.”

Eddie leans forward in his chair, peering over the wall down at the people he can see more clearly. He points at a woman in a purple coat with red hair.

“Tell me about her,” He asks. Richie leans forward to get a good look at her.

“Hmmm,” Richie grins, “Well, she works the night shift at Dublin’s down the street. As a stripper, of course.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, “Really? Why does she have to be a stripper?”

Richie scoffs, “She’s a hard-working mother, Eds. It’s not her fault she couldn’t afford college! She’s a dedicated mother and girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? She’s not married?” Eddie asks, wanting Richie to continue.

“Well, she would be if the United States would *let* her and her girlfriend get married.”

“Ah, I see,” Eddie nods in understanding, “So is the kid hers or her girlfriends?”

“Why’d you assume the kid wasn’t adopted?” Richie asks, deciding to settle back down onto Eddie’s shoulder. This time, Eddie wisely turns his face away for a moment to avoid getting a faceful of wild hair.

“Please,” He rolls his eyes, “It’s basically impossible for a same-sex couple to adopt, you know that.”

Richie goes quiet for a long moment. The cars start to make more noise on the streets, “It’s her girlfriend’s kid,” He answers, sounding hollow. Eddie understands- it hurts to be reminded that not everyone sees them as humans. Loving humans, with a desire for love and marriage and children. Eddie wiggles his arm up and around Richie’s back, playing with the curls he can reach. It takes only a few more moments before Richie speaks once more, “Do you want kids?”

Eddie sighs, closes his eyes, and lets himself pretend he lives in a

world without limitations of prejudice, “I think so. I... I know so, actually. I think about it a lot. The only reason I hesitate is because of my mom. Growing up she was- She messed me up so much. She’d sit at the kitchen table at the end of the hallway and wait until I tried to leave to do something with my friends. And when I did, when I finally worked up the courage to walk down that hallway she’d make me feel so *awful* for even *insinuating* that I’d want to do something without her. I felt so- so horrible, like I was just the worst son in the entire world. And, I don’t know... I don’t know if I know how to love any other way. I don’t know if I can love a child in the way they deserve, or anyone for that matter. Love is supposed to be selfless and pure.”

When he finishes, Richie lifts his head off of Eddie’s shoulder to look him in the eyes. They burn behind his glasses with determination, “I know I’ve only known you for a few months, but Eds, you are nothing like her. Sometimes I think I want to thank your mom for making you, my best friend, so perfectly. And then I remember that no, she might have made you, but she didn’t *make* you. You did that all yourself. You *could* have ended up just like her, but you *didn’t*. I’ve never seen anyone love their friends as fiercely as you do. You are *nothing* like her.”

Richie’s turned around in his seat so he’s sitting sideways, boring into Eddie’s soul with his sharp gaze. Eddie’s cheeks heat up and he hopes that Richie just assumes it’s from the cold winter air. He wants to say something but the words keep getting stuck in his throat, desperately trying to claw out. Richie seems to get the hint and opens his mouth once more.

“I worry too,” He answers, adjusting himself in his seat so he’s no longer facing Eddie, but the vast city in front of them, “My parents were... They were good. They loved me as best as they could. But they were so distant. Sometimes it feels like they were faceless. They almost never spoke to me, we didn’t have any big family dinners at a table like they do in the movies. We didn’t talk about our day or our emotions or our favorite books. I hardly can remember what they look like if I’m not looking at a photo of them. And even though I knew they loved me, it never felt like that. I want kids, so badly. But I don’t know if I know how to show love, to tell people I love them.”

He looks at Eddie through a sideways glance and does his little habitual hum to clear out his throat.

The sun seems to finally reach their little spot on the roof, and Richie *glows*. Wrapped in the green from his sweatshirt, the sun illuminates his rosy cheeks and burning brown eyes. It reminds Eddie of the wood that splinters in a fireplace, glowing so red it appears to be sparkling. The backs of their hands slide against each other and Eddie feels bold enough to wrap his index finger around Richie's. It takes only a moment before Richie intertwines their hands together.

There are so many things Eddie could say. He has so much to tell him his ribs nearly crack under the weight of it all. But this moment, it feels too precious, too perfect. Saying 'I love you' would cheapen the beauty of it, and it wouldn't be enough. It wouldn't have been the first time he said it to him, anyway. They've said I love you a million different ways. He wishes he was better with words. Richie doesn't deserve 'I love you', he deserves 'I'm proud of you', 'You're the kindest person I've ever met', 'You light up every room you walk into'. He deserves poems and essays and novels.

Eddie does what he's good at; He lays his head on Richie's shoulder, uses his other hand to brush his thumb along Richie's knuckles. He doesn't kiss him, because that would take much more bravery than he is capable of. His chest aches with how much he loves him, but he doesn't say it.

Instead, he says, "There's not a second I doubt that you love me. All of our friends know you love them. You show it, you do."

And Richie, nosing at the hairs on Eddie's head, says, "You do, too."

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie wishes he could say he was brave enough to angle his face upwards and kiss Richie right on the lips, just like the movies. He wants to have that kind of fairytale moment with Richie so, so badly. It just never seems like it's the right time, but maybe that's because he's a chicken. Or maybe it's because their love story is a long one. Or maybe it's because they won't have a love story at all.

But Eddie will take the moment for what it is. And it's this- Richie turning his face to press a kiss to Eddie's hair, whispering 'Happy New Year, Eds' like it's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said, and threading the rest of his fingers through Eddie's while they stand there until people start to flood out of the house, disrupting the magic of this little moment they carved out for themselves.

Eddie will take any moment with Richie for what it is.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow... I did not realize how long this took to create. I'm sorry it took so long but I think it was fully worth it. I'm super proud of this chapter, please, please let me know what you thought!

The house is pretty decent-sized, considering it is supposedly being rented by a college student. It's decorated nicely, too, so Eddie would assume the owner is likely a college girl. There's pretty fairy lights strung all across the house, sparkly tablecloths and runners, boxes filled with sparklers and party hats in every corner of every room.

1997 is minutes away, and Eddie is feeling suddenly very sentimental about how far he's come this year.

There's almost no time to think back on that, though, with the cheering and screaming and annoying as shit party horns going off every five minutes. The host is a friend of Bill and Audra's, though he has yet to meet them. Everybody is here, Bev and Ben the only couple for miles it seems, snuggled up on the couch and nearly asleep. Mike is chatting up a few girls, making them giggle with flirtatious remarks Eddie needs to ask him about later. Bill and Audra aren't anything like Bev and Ben, floating around the party like social butterflies. Stan, on the other hand, is standing next to Eddie like he's afraid of anyone else trying to talk to him- and well, Eddie understands that feeling. Parties just aren't his thing.

And Richie... well, Richie is nowhere to be found. About twenty minutes into the party he'd flitted away, rambling about a dare someone challenged him to do (squeeze lemons into his nose directly before chugging whiskey?) and Eddie really didn't want to see the outcome of that. Richie had disappeared, promising to be right back- and that was at 9:30. He really doesn't want to be the jealous type, because his relationship with his mother thrived solely on control, but he can't help the little pit of insecurity he gets in his stomach thinking that maybe Richie had found someone to count down these final minutes of 1996 with.

He supposes that maybe he should be happy for him and the lucky guy who gets to kiss him on New Year's Eve.

"Oh, wow," Stan snorts next to him. "I think Ben is done for the night." He motions towards the couch where Ben has fallen asleep with half his body weight on Bev- who is mouthing 'Help!' in their direction. They both shrug in response.

"I'm right there with him," Eddie sighs, looking around the room for a source of entertainment. Mike saunters up to them, clearly tired of whatever conversation he was having with the pretty group of girls.

"What? You couldn't decide which one of them you wanted to kiss at midnight so you just gave up?" Stan says sarcastically, but he leans against Mike when he throws an arm around him.

"Don't think I forgot that I promised to countdown to midnight with you." Mike sets the drink in his hand on the counter behind them as

Stan's face turns the color of Richie's truck.

"I didn't even ask you to do that, you just volunteered." Stan rolls his eyes.

"Because I *wanted* to." Mike tugs Stan closer to him. Eddie blinks.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh shit, was Mike flirting with those girls to make Stan *jealous*?

Eddie clears his throat loudly. "I'm gonna, uh, I'm going to find Richie."

He has no intention of seeking Richie out, though. He doesn't really want to see Richie sucking face with some other guy, or, *God forbid*, squeezing *lemons* into his nose. He just wants to give this awkward situation the privacy it deserves.

As he walks away he's nudged left and right by people. The party horns grow more intense as the minutes tick by, the music grows louder. Everything feels a bit much, the lights seemingly getting brighter and the noises overlapping like a cacophony of drunk college students.

To his right is the front door, promising peace and quiet. He snatches a water bottle from one of the coolers, his coat off the rack by the door, and he slips out into the freezing cold air of the night.

He exhales a warm breath onto his hands as they instantly turn cold and fumbles with rapidly numbing fingers to get his gloves out of his coat pocket and slip them on.

It's much quieter outside, but the thumping of the music can still be heard. It's bearable, at least.

He leans against the wall closest to him and reflects over everything that he's been through this year. The new, amazing friends. His first boyfriend. His new apartment. There were a lot of firsts this year. He can hardly recognize himself anymore- this new, unafraid (but still

very, very afraid) version of Eddie Kaspbrak.

And he's so fucking proud. He could sit around and mope about how nobody out there feels proud of him. His mother would be disappointed with all these new developments, or wary, at the very least. But he's proud of *himself*, and that's enough.

"Eds! I've been looking for you!" The words echo off of the walls around him and he's not sure where they're coming from. He whirls around but finds no answer. "Up here, dummy!"

He looks directly up, finding Richie leaning over the edge of a balcony. His hair hangs down around his face, concealing most of it from view, but Eddie would recognize that dumbass anywhere.

"Hold on, I'll come down there," Richie says, disappearing all at once. Eddie patiently waits.

Moments later he hears the front door open and close, the scuffing of shoes as Richie nears him. His lined denim jacket can't possibly be keeping him warm, with only a white sweater under it. He's wearing a black beanie as though it will do anything to protect him from the cold. He looks nice, *really* nice, but Eddie already knew that. He'd come here in Richie's truck, after all.

"How come you're not inside?" Richie asks, judgment-free with just a hint of concern. Eddie feels simultaneously flattered and annoyed.

"Well, Stan and Mike were having a *moment*, so I thought I'd give them some space."

"Please," Richie scoffs, leaning back against the wall next to Eddie. "Those two have been having *moments* on and off since Freshman year. They need to suck it up and get it over with already, you know?"

Eddie sucks in a breath and nods. Oh, he knows. He needs to do the same thing. Rip off the bandaid.

He looks up at the balcony Richie just came from. "Couldn't find anyone to kiss at midnight?" He tries his best to sound like he was *hoping* Richie would find someone to kiss, nudging his side with his

elbow and wagging his eyebrows.

Richie gives him a funny look, though, one that morphs from confused to disappointed. “No... I was-”

They're cut off by the sound of loud screaming, signifying that midnight must be drawing close.

“Me neither.” Eddie shrugs, nudging his boot at the toe of Richie's thin, definitely-not-protecting-him-from-hypothermia, converse. “I wasn't really trying to find anybody, though.”

“No?” Richie's lips twist into a funny sort of smile.

“Nah.” Eddie rolls his shoulders, watching Richie use one arm to prop himself up on the wall, facing Eddie. “I mean, I wouldn't have minded, but after Matt... I'm not really interested in dating someone until I'm friends with them first.”

Richie hums softly. “I know the feeling. Friends first, fuckbuddies later.”

Eddie snorts and swats at Richie. “Not exactly what I meant.”

Richie doesn't say anything else, just stares at Eddie like he's admiring a painting. Eddie flushes under the scrutiny, shoulders hiking up close to his ears in a way of concealing his face. He knows it doesn't work.

The house behind them suddenly booms with the voices of people counting down the seconds to midnight. Richie exhales a loud breath and turns so he's leaning against the wall once more, reaching out and looping their index fingers together. His head falls down on top of Eddie's, sort of uncomfortably squishing it, but Eddie doesn't mind.

“3!...2!...1!”

Eddie wishes he could say he was brave enough to angle his face upwards and kiss Richie right on the lips, just like the movies. He wants to have that kind of fairytale moment with Richie so, so badly. It just never seems like it's the right time, but maybe that's because

he's a chicken. Or maybe it's because their love story is a long one. Or maybe it's because they won't have a love story at all.

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Eddie will take any moment with Richie for what it is.

"I hate when you guys come over," Eddie groans. "Now that I live here I have to clean up all of your shit when you leave."

All six of his dumbass friends are piled in the living room, drinking out of soda cans and bottles that Eddie just *knows* he'll have to clean up later. Despite all of his bitching, he doesn't mind the cleanup as long as he gets to hang out with everyone.

"I just want to point out that *I* never complained this much when I lived here." Bill points proudly at himself.

"That's because this house was a permanent pigsty until I moved in. You didn't clean shit."

"We really should do something other than watch movies and play board games in our living room," Richie says from his spot lying facedown on the carpeted floor.

"We still have a few weeks before classes start, we could go on a road trip," Bev suggests, turning to Ben to do their telepathic communication.

It seems they come to an agreement because Ben speaks up, "My Uncle has a cabin in the Adirondacks. He might let us stay there."

"Holy shit," Richie flops over onto his back, "That would be so cool."

Eddie considers the thought of a road trip. With no track meets until April, when the weather becomes bearable once more, he's completely able to have an impromptu road trip. He's never been on one, not even with his Mother. Driving cars for that long made her nervous. He'd always thought that a road trip with friends was the kind of experience you *had* to have before you died. But... driving on icy roads for five hours?

"Spaghetti, please!" Richie whines, clearly noticing the look of hesitation on Eddie's face, "It would be so much fun!"

Eddie tosses the idea around in his head a little while longer, but any concerns he may have are completely overruled by the sad puppy look on Richie's face. Why is he such a sucker for that?

"Fine, but how will we get there? Do we even have a car big enough to fit all of us?"

"Mine can fit eight," Bev announces proudly. "Sure, it's one of those old, rickety vans but it's the only one that's going to get us all there." She shoots a look in Eddie's direction, as if to say *'Don't even think about complaining'*.

His friends are the *worst*.

In exchange for being coerced to go on this potentially dangerous road trip, he forces Richie to go shopping with him for all the necessary supplies. They purchase sunblock, new thermal undergarments for Richie (because he can never be bothered to protect himself from freezing to death), flashlights, jumper cables, and an ice-scraper. All important things, and all things Richie complains about the whole time he's pushing the cart around the store. Eddie just knows he'll end up thanking him in the long run.

Bev's van is an ugly, old, white pedophile type van, but it's incredibly roomy. There's plenty of space in the back for all of their bags and some extra precautionary supplies, and there's lots of room for them to all stretch out and not feel too claustrophobic for the entire five-

hour trip.

Ben settles in the front seat with Bev. Bill, Mike, and Stan all take up the middle seat which leaves Eddie and Richie to ungracefully clamber over all of them into the back row. It's the tightest space in the van, and Eddie feels a little sorry for Richie's knees, but he's definitely not complaining about the proximity. He's also not complaining about Audra deciding not to come, because then a third person would have been crammed back there with them.

"Did you get all 37 bottles of antibiotic ointment crammed in there, Doctor K?" Richie asks Eddie as he slides over the middle seats and takes his spot in the back.

"Your British accent is only getting better, I see," Eddie rolls his eyes. They buckle up at the same time Bev starts up the van, taking off in the direction of some very snowy, very daunting mountains, "Have you ever been to the Adirondacks before?"

"Nope," Richie says, pulling out a bag of M&Ms even though they've only been on the road for five minutes. Eddie figured he should save all snacking for at least halfway through the trip to stave off boredom, "But I looked up some pictures. Did you know a serial killer used to murder tourists there?"

"Please don't say things like that," Eddie pleads.

"It's true. But don't worry, they caught him. We only have Big Foot to worry about now, Eddie, my love."

Richie munches loudly on the M&Ms, turns and pushes his shoeless feet into Eddie's lap.

"Gross!" Eddie gags, making Stan turn around to look at them.

"I *will* switch with you if you're going to be like this the *entire* time you're around him," He glares at Eddie.

"It's his fault! He put his feet in my lap! They smell!" Of course, he doesn't really care. When they first met this might've made Eddie shove his feet away, but he's been doing this to him for so long that it hardly phases him anymore. He just likes to make a scene around

Richie.

Richie pokes a toe at Eddie's stomach, "They're freshly washed, Princess."

"Don't call me that, dumbass," Eddie says, swatting at the hand that's holding onto the M&Ms. He apparently doesn't know his own strength, because he sends the M&Ms flying. Either that, or Richie was trying to make a scene, too, and purposefully sent them flying.

"Oh shit," Richie says as the colored candies shower down everywhere, in his hair and all over the seat.

"Tozier, did you just spill M&Ms in *my* van?" Bev shouts as Ben turns around in an attempt to survey the damage.

"I had nothing to do with it," Stan announces, as though anyone thought he had anything to do with it.

"Eyes on the road, Marsh, I'll clean it up with my mouth," To punctuate his point he tosses several from the floor into his mouth. Eddie's face pinches in disgust.

"You fucking better," Beverly grumbles, eyeing him through the rearview mirror.

"This is your fault," Richie shoots a glare at him. Eddie simply places one hand on Richie's right ankle, thumbing at the rounded bone in circles while sticking his tongue out at him. He doesn't miss the way Richie shivers.

Once they reach the cabin, Ben circles through the house peering into every bedroom. Everyone unloads their bags from the van, fighting with each other to get inside as quickly as possible to avoid the imminent hypothermia. The snow is *thick*, much more so than it is in the city. Ben promises he'll shovel out little pathways once he gets the chance. They all came dressed in the proper attire, but marching through the snow is difficult for the shorter people in the group—specifically Bev and Eddie. It's sort of like wading through water.

Richie thinks it's *hilarious*. His face turns bright red with laughter every time Eddie has to traverse back to the car to retrieve another one of his bags- because he packed so *many*. He has two suitcases and several smaller backpacks and Richie absolutely refuses to help him with any of them because he thinks it's so fucking funny to watch Eddie struggle through mounds of snow.

Eddie's on his last bag, hoisting it up over his shoulder as he lifts his legs up high, using the footprints he's already made as a path. Richie watches him from the front door, giggling like a madman and calling him 'shortstack' over and over again, when Eddie loses his balance a bit. He teeters on the edge of his foot, ditching the bag when he realizes his tumble is inevitable and lands face first in the snow in front of him.

"Oh, shit, Eds," He hears Richie say. There's the crunch of footsteps nearing him as he tries to push himself up, rolling over onto his back when he realizes it's not working. "Are you okay, shortstack?" Richie asks, grinning face framed a black hair tucked up under a green beanie coming into view above him.

"I'm fine," Eddie huffs, pushing back against the snow but immediately slipping back against the cold surface. He shivers violently when some of it falls just under the edge of his sweater, melting against his stomach. Richie extends a hand. "I don't need your help."

Richie just smirks. "You sure about that?" He leans back, watching Eddie try and fail again to get up.

"Fine, maybe I need a little help."

"That's what I thought." Richie doesn't even give him the dignity of extending a hand this time, instead grabbing onto his waist and pulling him up like he's weightless. It's fucking aggravating that it's sort of hot.

"Okay!" Ben calls attention to himself once they're all packed inside, still shivering since the heat hasn't spread throughout the house yet. Eddie looks longingly at the fireplace. "There are three queen beds and one pullout couch, I don't care where you go just know that Bev

and I call the last room on the left.” He pulls Bev into his side, pridefully smiling at her, “It’s the biggest one, babe.”

Stan, redfaced and nervous, says, “Would you want to room together, Mike?”

It doesn’t take a genius to deduce that the answer is yes.

“That leaves me with the couch,” Bill says before either Richie or Eddie speak a word.

“Oh, Bill, that’s fine. I can take the couch,” Eddie says. He’d feel guilty making Bill sleep on the couch while he got the comfy bed.

“It’s fine, Eddie.” Bill waves him off, pushing his suitcase in the direction of the living room couch. “You and Richie have been sharing a bed since you met practically, it wouldn’t make sense any other way.”

Eddie goes so hot that he could single-handedly warm the entire house.

“Yeah, Eds,” Richie says, tone already teasing, “It wouldn’t make sense any other way.”

They haven’t slept in the same bed as each other since Eddie left for Christmas, which wasn’t all that long ago, but it still makes Eddie nervous and hot all over. Then, he had put his feelings on pause to give Richie time to grieve. The space between them was emotional and sometimes physical. They were still very affectionate with each other, but not *too* much. There was a line, and Eddie could feel when he was crossing it.

Richie is still grieving, some days are exceptionally bad, but most, lately, are good. Eddie has taken his feelings off of pause in response to Richie’s rising mood and they’re festering inside him. He wouldn’t mind if he felt this way forever, heat blossoming in his chest like the sun is exploding inside of him.

All of this makes sharing a bed with Richie again seem a bit daunting.

Richie, as usual, allows him no time to be worried.

“Hey, fucknut, why’re you just standing there? If you don’t wanna be a princess I’m not going to carry all your bags to the bedroom for you like you’re royalty.”

“Asshole,” Eddie grumbles, pulling one of the suitcases behind him as he scurries after Richie.

Eddie’s clothes have soaked through and he’s chilled to the bone so Richie goes through the trouble of making him some hot chocolate while he changes into a fresh, dry set of clothes. The house is decorated in a very kitschy, redneck fashion, with chandeliers made from antlers and thick, wooden rocking chairs. Richie and Eddie’s comforter has a family of bears stitched onto it and a wooden sign hangs above the bedframe that reads ‘Better Together’ in an ugly cursive font.

“Have you seen the backyard yet? You should get out there before the sun goes down,” Richie says once he enters the room again, holding two equally kitschy mugs in either hand. Eddie grabs the one with a big red hen painted on the side.

“Is there snow on the porch?” Eddie asks tentatively, still cold from his spill earlier.

“Ben shoveled most of it off.” Richie places a hand on his back, ushering him in the direction of the backdoor. “You grew up in Maine, shouldn’t you be used to the snow by now?”

“‘Liking the snow’ and ‘being used to the snow’ are two different things, Tozier.”

From the back porch, though, Eddie thinks he might like snow more than he originally thought. The backyard opens into what one would call a ‘winter wonderland’. A little clearing peers down into a thick forest of trees sprinkled with snow that sparkles in the sunset, opening up into a large lake with only a few boats milling around.

“Oh, wow. This is beautiful,” Eddie gapes, sucking down some of the steaming chocolate drink in his hands before it goes cold.

“Yeah,” Richie whispers, voice reverent. Eddie turns to look at him only to find he’s already staring back, face coated in warm light from the setting sun. His skin looks like the snow, pale and lovely and shimmering under the heat of the sunset. It seems to Eddie like Richie was meant for the snow, with his pearly skin and black hair. He could almost camouflage into the woods, if it wasn’t for his loud mouth. But there’s some warmth to him that seems too bright for the winter, for Maine, or for New York City. It’s his loud mouth, the red tint to his hair when he’s outside, the intensity with which he loves. Richie Tozier doesn’t fit in anywhere, and yet he fits in everywhere. Eddie thinks that maybe he likes Richie too much, with how soft his thoughts are becoming.

“Too cold,” Eddie decides out loud, turning back towards the door with Richie right on his heel.

Everyone has gathered around the fire that Mike has lit, tucking themselves together on the couch. There’s only one armchair left, which means-

“Richie, don’t you dare!” Eddie shouts, barely squeaking by Richie to land in the chair, making it teeter a bit before hitting the ground once more. The others slap their hands over their ears at the screeching sound it makes.

“You’re much comfier looking than that chair anyway, Eds.” Richie flops down on Eddie’s thighs, bony ass digging into the muscle.

“Gehuf o’me,” Eddie grumbles at the shoulder that’s pressed firmly against his mouth.

“This is the last seat in the house, darlin’.”

“Sit on the floor,” Eddie responds as Richie adjusts himself, moving around precariously. One wrong move pinches a nerve and he pushes at the pointy mass on top of him. Richie tumbles down onto the floor with a thud, groaning when his hipbone lands directly on the hardwood paneling.

Eddie shoots up in an instant, sitting on his knees next to Richie. “Oh shit, I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Richie’s face, pinched in pain, looks up at him. “I’m fantastic,” He answers, cracking into a smile and shooting up off the floor onto the now-abandoned armchair.

“That’s playing dirty!” Eddie accuses.

Eddie ends up curled into the side of the armchair, feet entirely in Richie’s lap as he wraps his boney arms around Eddie’s folded up legs. It’s much more comfortable than it should be, and Eddie is a little annoyed at himself for enjoying it as much as he does.

But he still does.

It feels safe, with his head resting on Richie’s shoulder, a thumb swirling subconscious patterns onto the outside of his thigh. It feels safe and warm and right.

He catches Bev smiling at him from her spot on the couch, in a way that suggests she *knows*. Eddie has always suspected that, at this point, everyone must know. But he wonders now if she always knew, even from the beginning. Even when Richie was pinching his cheek at The Super Dragon and pretending to hit on him.

“So, now that you two are done making a scene, can we put in a movie?” Eddie flushes at Stan’s words and goes as far as to flip him off.

It’s too late to go outside so they’ve decided to spend tonight like they spend every other night together- with a movie and some hot cocoa.

Eddie’s eyelids fall heavy with sleep before the movie even starts, the warmth from the burning fire and Richie’s body taking away every memory of his snowy fall from earlier. He starts to doze off, head lolling to the side limply before Richie offers up his shoulder as a support, and Eddie doesn’t even get a chance to think before he slips

completely into slumber tucked up so closely to Richie it's nearly impossible to tell where he ends and Richie begins.

The next time he opens his eyes, it's to the warm, golden glow of the fire lighting up the room, Richie's bones shifting underneath the side of his face, soft hands brushing over his cheek and a rumbling voice requesting him to wake up. Through the fuzzy haze of sleep, his eyes flit up to observe Richie- basked in liquid gold, hazy brown eyes wrinkling at the corners with a smile.

The fire wavers, as does the light in the room. It's dead silent apart from the gentle crackling of wood in the distance, the soft sounds of their skin sliding together as Richie tries to untangle himself from Eddie's sleep leaden limbs.

A fingertip brushes across the lifeline of his palm, the nerves electrified like they've caught on fire. Eddie scrunches his nose and barely manages to catch the offending finger as it pulls away from him. Richie looks at him like he's been caught committing a crime, lower lip taugt under two buck teeth, eyelashes fluttering in uncertainty.

Sleep still weighs heavy on his mind, and Eddie isn't certain of what's happening, but he pulls Richie's hand up to his face and brushes his lips over the knuckles, light as a feather. He keeps his eyes downcast for a moment, observing the vellus hairs that sprout across the back of his hand, then he turns it over and observes the lifeline, carefully brushing his fingers over it.

"Yours is longer than mine," Eddie speaks for the first time, voice crackling like the fire from sleep. It sounds too loud in the room, like he shouldn't have spoken at all.

"Bigger hands," Richie says with a nonchalant shrug, but his lips fall open when Eddie traces over it again.

Eddie swallows roughly and tries not to stare at those lips, sanity returning to him in time with consciousness. He looks back to his

own lifeline and shakes his head, “I don’t think I was meant to have a very long life.”

Richie looks startled, he wraps his palm around Eddie’s as though hiding it from sight will make it untrue, “That whole lifeline thing is bullshit, Eds, just hokey bullshit made up by people looking to make a few bucks.”

“It’s not that, it...” Eddie watches Richie’s chest rise and fall as though he’s struck a nerve. It only occurs to Eddie just now that maybe he has, considering all the recent events. “I don’t know how to explain it. It just feels... like that’s the great irony of my life. That with all the bubble wrap and avoidance of germs and risks I’m going to end up dead long before the rest of the world anyway. It feels like everytime I take a step forward I’m headed towards something disastrous.”

Richie, despite all of his untangling efforts, moves in close once more, tugging Eddie toward him until he can rest his chin on his head. “Have you ever considered that maybe that’s just your mom getting into your mind? Making you feel like everything you do is putting you in potential danger?”

Eddie shrugs, feeling Richie move with him. “I wish I didn’t let her get to me so easily, but it’s like she *lives* in my head. She’s a fucking squatter.”

Richie snorts, his lips surely curling into a smile that Eddie can’t see. “Having setbacks doesn’t mean you aren’t moving forward. She might get to you sometimes and you might feel like you’re taking a step back every time she does, but trust me, you’re taking fucking *leaps* forward.”

Eddie feels his lip quiver, suddenly thankful Richie’s not looking directly at him right now. His throat feels tight as he tries to respond, but Richie luckily seems to take his silence as a response in itself.

“Now, I believe we have a comfy bed to get to, instead of this uncomfortable arm chair. Should I carry you?” Richie teases, pulling away and wiggling his eyebrows with a joking grin.

“No!” Eddie shouts as loudly as he can without waking other people in the cabin, standing up and extending a hand out to Richie to help him up. They slide on socked feet to the bedroom, down the hardwood flooring of the hall and straight to their large, shared mattress.

Richie twirls, once, then twice, then collapses on the bed in a heap of curls and soft pajamas. Eddie copies him, much more seriously and refined, before tossing himself by his side, both curling towards each other without a second thought. Richie’s knees hit just below Eddie’s, his hands falling into the open space between them. The nails of them are painted neon green, chipped and dirty, but they’re *his* and Eddie wishes he was half-asleep once more so he would have the guts to reach out and hold them. It weighs heavy in the air, so close that all it would take is one movement before they would be tangled in each others arms. Eddie wants to press so close to him that he melts into Richie’s chest, that his mouth superglues itself to Richie’s collarbone and his hands to the soft curve of his hips. He wants to tuck a thigh between Richie’s, wrap his arms so firmly around that delicate rib cage that he nearly bursts.

He wants, he wants, he *wants*.

But he can’t have.

He shouldn’t.

“Goodnight, Rich,” He whispers as he turns off the bedside lamp, rolling over until his back is turned to Richie, to his hands, his chest, his collarbones, his hips, his thighs, and everything else Eddie might dream of touching tonight.

During the time they were planning this little road trip, Eddie had let it slip that he’d never been skiing or snowboarding before. Richie, who apparently *had* been skiing before, was over the moon that he would be the one to teach Eddie how to ski. Eddie was a bit nervous about the whole thing, but Richie had sworn up and down that skiing was just like the ‘track of snow’, so he was sure to be a natural.

As it turns out, Richie Tozier is a fucking liar.

Skiing is *torture*. It's completely unnatural and terrifying. Eddie has run into seven people while Richie stands by laughing his ass off, desperately trying to stop so he can continue explaining to Eddie what he's doing wrong, all while skiing like a fucking pro. He's from *California* and he's the biggest klutz Eddie knows. How can he possibly ski so effortlessly?

The next time Eddie nearly skis directly into somebody, he opts to sit down onto his ass rather than crash into some poor little kid, making himself wipe out, shoveling snow up under his jacket, and turning him into a soaking wet, freezing mess for the second time since they arrived here.

"Eds, fuck," Richie wheezes, giggling as he glides down smoothly to Eddie and extends a hand. An angry parent shouts at him for his foul mouth, but he takes it in stride, apologizing without taking his eyes off of Eddie who is now shivering on the ground. Well, Eddie assumes he hasn't taken his eyes off of him- they're both wearing thick goggles to protect from the blinding white snow, so he can't see his eyes at all.

"This isn't funny you asshole." Eddie takes his hand and squeaks when he starts to slide forward, immediately stopped by Richie's arm around his waist. Bev skis by for the *third* fucking time.

"You ski like an overgrown toddler, it's *hilarious*," Richie says, waving at the redhead as she zooms by.

Eddie pouts but he knows he's right, several people have laughed at him on their way down the slope. He imagines he would do the same if he saw someone else skiing as poorly as him.

"I saw you wipe out." Stan skirts to a stop directly in front of them. How is Eddie the *only* one who's this bad at this? "Are you okay?"

"It was merely a heroic action," Richie says in a voice that sounds like he's presenting the Queen or a war hero. "He was doing it to avoid bulldozing that small child over there."

“Heroic indeed,” Stan says dryly. “Help him get down the rest of the slope before he falls into a tree well. He’s so short we’d never find him again.”

“Fuck you,” Eddie grumbles.

Even though he can’t see, he can tell Stan is rolling his eyes behind his goggles. He turns back around and takes off down the hill.

Richie gets him down to level ground and manages to convince him to give it a go one more time. Torn between wanting to make his own decisions based on what feels right and ‘taking *leaps* forward’ like Richie was so proud of him for last night, Eddie hesitates for a few moments before reluctantly agreeing.

It’s just a stupid fucking ski lift. Eddie’s flown in planes, been at the top of the Empire State Building, and *loves* the rides at amusement parks that shoot all the way to the top before dropping almost all the way down.

It shouldn’t scare him at all to be seated in a ski lift, which he knows for a fact to be one of the safest methods of transportation. All he has to do is sit still and wait to jump off at the end.

It shouldn’t scare him at all, but all it takes is a quick glance down to the white depths below and the knowledge that in a few short minutes he’s going to have to jump off with two motherfucking surfboards stuck on his feet to send him into a panic attack unlike any of the others he’d ever experienced.

It’s just a stupid *fucking* ski lift.

He feels so fucking pathetic.

When he feels it coming on at first, he tries to will it away, push it down and pretend it’s not happening, but that only seems to make it rear its ugly head further. When he was a kid his mother had convinced him that these panic attacks were actually asthma attacks that could be cured by an inhaler, and it had actually worked. The inhaler was like a safety blanket- a placebo, if you will- and when he’d moved away from her he’d ditched the inhaler because the panic

attacks had subsided.

People don't die from panic attacks, right? Right?

"Eds?" Richie is leaning forward, far too recklessly in Eddie's opinion. There's no safety bars on this thing.

"C-careful!" He pushes Richie back, wheezing as he speaks.

Richie's mouth opens and closes a few times. "Why do you- Are you okay?"

The lift rocks and Eddie sucks in another wheezing breath, leaning as far back into his seat as he can because he *really* does not want to be on the news for killing his best friend on a ski lift because he was spazzing.

Richie is trying and failing to stay calm, he can *feel* it even with his eyes squeezed shut.

"Panic attack," Eddie chokes. He wants to tell him not to make fun of him but he doesn't think he'd be able to get the words out right now.

"Okay," Richie breathes, but he doesn't sound calm at all, "You've gotta jump off with me in a second, do you think you can do that?" Eddie blinks his eyes open, observes the proximity of the end of the lift. "If you jump off, I can help you better. I think the last thing you need right now is a big scene and an emergency brake on the ski lift."

Eddie's fingers find his effortlessly, as naturally as breathing- well, not as naturally as breathing is coming to him right *now*. He swallows, nods, and Richie counts to three before they both jump off.

Eddie stumbles but Richie drags him out of the way, over to the best area he can find that won't end up with them flying downhill. People spare them a glance of curiosity before moving on with their lives.

"Have you had one of these before?" Richie asks. Eddie nods. "How can I help?"

Richie is next to him, their skis all tangled up with each other but his grip is firm on Eddie's arm. With his goggles on he looks a little like

an android or something, faceless and emotionless. Eddie would trade his soul for his inhaler right now. He tries to picture it, pretend like it's in his hand. It works, but only a little.

"Eds, I don't want to scare you but I'm really freaking out right now. Could you please-"

He stops short when Eddie reaches up wildly and tugs Richie's goggles down over his nose, revealing his frantically worried eyes. His eyebrows furrow and smooth out cartoonishly, blinking against the sudden bright light.

"Just- keep talking." Eddie just *knows* he's going to get shit for this later, for needing to see Richie's eyes to calm down his breathing, but right now it's the only thing that's working. Richie starts rambling, eyes characteristically scrunching up or widening as he does so, and the pain in Eddie's chest starts to unfurl. He's not even listening to what's being said, merely nodding along and pretending like he has any idea what he's going on about.

"Are you- Uh, you seem better." Richie exhales through rounded lips when Eddie nods. "That was the scariest fucking thing ever. Don't look down, I think we're standing in yellow snow now."

Eddie scrunches his nose up but laughs anyway. "You're disgusting," He admonishes. Richie giggles, high-pitched and stupidly wonderful.

"So," He starts with a smirk, "You got a thing for my eyes, or...?"

Eddie goes so hot with embarrassment he thinks his brain might melt. "Fuck off, Tozier. I'm going down this hill without you," Eddie snaps, turning towards the slope with a ski pole in each hand.

"No! Wait! You could fall into a tree well and die!" Richie shouts, but Eddie is already too busy barrelling into another small child.

"I've always wanted to try snowboarding," Bill says while blowing on a cup of black coffee. Eddie ordered a hot chocolate from the little cafe because he feels like he needs to replenish some of the thousands

of calories he burned freaking out and mowing down other skiers. He also decided to split a sandwich with Richie, but Richie has hogged most of it.

“Why?” Bev snorts from the other side of the booth, “Snowboarding is the surfing of the snow.”

“What does that mean?” Bill questions, watching her shovel fries into her mouth.

“She means that it’s kind of a...” Ben trails off, not quite finding the right word.

“She means it makes you look like a douchebag,” Richie cuts in loudly, knocking into Eddie as he goes to pick up his mug. When he finishes grossly trying to suck one of the marshmallows in the top of the cup down his gullet, he places it back on the counter and wraps his arm around Eddie’s shoulders instead.

Bill scoffs, “That’s just a stupid stereotype.”

“It’s a stereotype for a reason, my friend.” Richie gestures in the direction of a pack of guys who have just entered the lodge. They all look almost identical with their frosted tips and baggy black coats—some of which read *‘White powder is the best drug’*. “Look at them. Don’t they just *look* like douchebags?”

“They could be really nice,” Mike supplies, but Eddie, Richie, and Bev are already too busy giggling at how ridiculous they look. Richie presses a cheek to the top of Eddie’s head as he laughs and Bev gives them that same *look* from before. Eddie chooses to ignore it and only presses closer to him.

“Promise me...” Bev starts between giggles, “Promise me you will *never* get frosted tips, Bill.”

“Wait,” Eddie laughs, “Promise me you *will*. Come on, Bev, just think of how funny it would be if Bill looked like *that*,” He cackles, making the mistake of pointing a finger in the direction of the group of snowboarders.

Richie sees it before he does, Eddie doesn’t even get a *chance* to see

what's about to happen because Richie's shoulders are broadening like a bird spreading its wings, covering Eddie's line of sight.

"Something funny, fruitcake?" A voice says, and Eddie arches his back to see around Richie's shoulder. One of the snowboarders clearly saw him laughing and is wandering in their direction, settling just at the corner of their table. Richie's entire spine stiffens in a split second.

"Yeah, our own fucking conversation, so why don't you just mind your fucking business, Tony Hawk?"

Eddie grips onto Richie's hand tightly under the table, a warning that says 'Don't you dare do anything stupid, dipshit'.

"Wow! The four-eyed fairy's kinda feisty, huh?" Whether or not this guy knows Richie is gay is beyond Eddie, but he's going after him like he's wearing nothing but a pride flag while making out with this guy's dad. There's a lot of things Eddie has come to learn about Richie, namely that he is the most gentle person Eddie's ever met. Richie just doesn't put up a fight, it's not in his nature. He might make a snarky comment or two, but that's as far as he will go. Right now, though, it seems something about that comment makes his blood *boil* under his skin, flinching like he's been hit. Eddie frantically worries about the possibility of Richie getting his ass handed to him if he starts a fight right now.

"Why don't you drop it?" Stan says nonchalantly, pointing a finger over his shoulder. There on the wall is a sign that reads 'Fighting Will Not Be Tolerated'. "I don't think your friends will appreciate it if you get them thrown out of the lodge."

The guy blinks at the sign, demeanor softening a few notches. He looks back over his shoulder at the rest of his friends who are watching him.

"Whatever, flamer," He says, turning to leave but not before he smacks the back of Richie's head. It's not too hard, but it's enough to make Eddie see red. In a flash of anger, he slides the cup of steaming hot chocolate across the counter, pushing it *hard*, and watches it jump off the tabletop and dump down the guys nonabsorbent pant

leg and directly into his boot. That *has* to burn.

“Oops,” Eddie says sweetly, relishing in the way Richie turns to look at him with the most hysterically incredulous look he’s ever seen.

Needless to say, they’re banned from the ski lodge.

So, they head straight back to the cabin, bellies full and Eddie bursting with pride- mostly because Richie won’t stop talking about ‘how *cool* that was’. Eddie is completely over the moon because, between Matt and the panic attack and his *mother*, he’d been feeling like he looked like a pathetic ‘damsel in distress’, and he is so *sick* of people seeing him that way. A badass moment here and there reminds him and everyone around him that he isn’t as fragile as he looks.

That’s one of the many things he loves about Richie- he never treats Eddie like he’s fragile. They wrestle and fight, and Richie never needs to stop and make sure he’s okay. He doesn’t coddle Eddie, doesn’t fight his battles for him. When Eddie is with Richie, he’s strong and brave and independent. He’s never fragile.

That’s another thing he’s learned about Richie, however, is that while he never treats Eddie like he’s fragile, sometimes *he* needs to be treated like he’s fragile. He puts on a big show, an illusion that nothing can touch him, that he’s through the roof with confidence, security, and the ability to handle just about anything. For a little while in the beginning Eddie had believed this to be true. He thought Richie was completely unbothered by the rest of the world. As it turned out, it was merely a shield made up of jokes and a well-crafted facade of bravado, created to hide paper-thin skin and a heart that bled incessantly.

Eddie is far less delicate than everyone makes him out to be. Richie is far more delicate than he’d ever want anyone to know.

It’s that knowledge that gets the ball rolling on what happens next.

The fire warms the living room just down the hall, but Richie and Eddie are in their bedroom. Richie is organizing the mess on the floor at Eddie's request because, well, it's entirely his fault that the room is such a mess only a day into their trip. Eddie lies on the bed, watching him hang up his coat, pile up his dirty clothes, and change his sweaty shirt all while humming a tune to some song he's been listening to on repeat as of late.

Usually, Eddie wouldn't have any complaints about the sleepy atmosphere and gentle humming, but Richie hasn't spoken in at least fifteen minutes. Even if Eddie is busy in another room, Richie will talk to himself. He performs voices, makes little comments about whatever he's doing, or sings openly- loud enough that their upstairs neighbors beat the floor with a broom.

Richie is inside his head, and Eddie has no idea why.

"Are you alright?" He finally asks, ready to tear his hair out. Richie glances over at him with little emotion on his face.

"Fit as a fiddle, Spaghettio." He returns to moving his shoes into the closet. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem a little weird." Eddie shrugs.

"Weirder than normal?" He teases, seemingly expecting the conversation to end with an eyeroll or maybe a pillow thrown at his head.

"Yes, actually," Eddie says as Richie squats down, rearranging clothes in his suitcase, "Are you upset about what that guy said? Because all of it was just... baseless insults, Rich."

Richie's back goes rigid and Eddie blinks in surprise. *Wow*. He really is upset about that.

"No, of course not," Richie scoffs lightly. "I don't- I'm not-" He flounders for a moment longer, trying and failing to complete a joke. Then he chuckles, mostly to himself, "No. That would be stupid."

Eddie cocks his head to the side, squinting at Richie's unmoving back. "It wouldn't be stupid, though. He was being an asshole. You *should*

be upset.” Richie stands once more, this time turning around to look Eddie in the eyes.

“I’m not upset,” He answers, looking quite upset. He almost looks *mad* at himself for having the audacity to be upset in the first place. “It’s just- I was...” He sighs, heavy and long, shaking a hand through his wind-tangled hair. “Okay, story time.”

Eddie props himself up on his pillows, nodding at him to continue. The bed dips as Richie sits down on it next to him.

“When I was a kid- thirteen, I think- I *loved* to go to the arcade. I spent practically half my time there. There were these guys, they liked to make fun of me- well, really, it was a lot worse than just ‘making fun’ of me. But, one day, they caught me with a boy. It wasn’t even a thing, I just thought he was cute and asked him to play with me for a while. He... He started it. They all chased me out of the arcade in front of everybody.” He takes in a shuddering breath, shoulders drawing closer. “I remember the... the other boys in the arcade. They moved *away* from me, like they were scared to be near me. That wasn’t even the worst it got, but it’s always stuck with me... So, yeah, the name-calling earlier pissed me off a little bit.”

He looks at Eddie through a sideways glance, face purposefully emotionless. Eddie can *feel* the weight of this admission in the air, can hear the walls tumbling down, so he says nothing for a moment. Richie’s hands fidget in his lap restlessly, Eddie’s own hand resting on the bed next to Richie’s thigh. The pinky brushes against the hem of his jeans, feeling the warmth radiating off of him.

“You stood up for yourself this time, though,” Eddie says, voice low. He can hardly stand being unable to touch Richie for this long, so he climbs over his hesitation and grabs onto one of Richie’s irritatingly antsy hands. “You should be proud of that.”

Richie smiles, small and sad. He gives a squeeze to Eddie’s fingers. “You did a better job of standing up for me than I did.” He jabs a gentle elbow at Eddie’s ribs, “You fucking badass.”

Eddie, giggling with pride, says, “I would’ve done it then, too. At the arcade, I mean, if I had known you. I was a spitfire when I was

little.”

“What do you mean ‘was’?” Richie scoffs, “Are you trying to tell me that you were even feistier than you are now?”

“Hmmm, maybe a little.” Eddie looks down at their intertwined fingers. “I think you just bring that side out of me.”

“The side of you that acts and flirts like a thirteen-year-old boy?”

“I do not *flirt* with you!” Eddie pushes at his shoulder, blushing at how transparent that lie is. As much as he tries not to, he *totally* flirts with Richie. He’s not even *good* at it, but he just can’t keep it all inside.

“When will you admit your undying love for me, Spaghetti?” Richie sighs, clutching at his heart. Sometimes Eddie thinks Richie must know that he’s head over heels for him, but other times he thinks Richie is completely clueless, too absorbed in his own head (which Eddie imagines is filled with replays of Seinfeld and a constant stream of dirty jokes) to notice.

There’s an expiration date on all of this, a timer counting down until it all explodes. Eddie can feel it ticking by along with his racing heartbeat. But, God, he can’t even find it in himself to care. Because this- laying side by side with their hearts on their sleeves as they laugh along with one another- is worth all the heartbreak, inevitable pain and sorrow in the world.

“Never,” Eddie finally answers, and he thinks he means it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Soooo what did you think? I'm so excited to hear from you guys!